

Explaining Social Behavior: More Nuts and Bolts for the Social Sciences

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Explaining Social Behavior offers a highly readable and highly opinionated introduction to Jon Elster's theory of social scientific explanation. This book is expansive, offering not only a general theory of scientific explanation, but also a theory of mind, a theory of social norms, a theory of textual interpretation, and even a theory of viable political constitutions. Given this breadth, such a book could easily suffer as a result of its own expansiveness; however, because Elster approaches his subject with clarity and precision—eschewing both the obscurantism of cultural theory and the jargon-ridden language of contemporary quantitative social science—a clear model for explaining social behavior emerges.

Elster's model is grounded on a series of undefended theoretical assumptions: (1) scientific explanation is necessarily causal; (2) the social sciences explain rational actions; (3) the cause of a rational action is a reason; and (4) a reason is a belief-desire pair. Together, these assumptions imply that social scientific explanations must appeal to the beliefs and desires of individual agents. Thus, Elster argues that seeking the cause of a social behavior (or more precisely, a social action) requires the social scientist to engage in a process of *interpretation*, by which she gains insight into the beliefs and desires that *rationally* motivate an agent to act—it is only upon this basis that she can come to understand why the agent did what she did. This much should be familiar to philosophers of social science, and to most social scientists as well. However, Elster assumes that scientific explanation is necessarily causal; thus, if interpretations are to be explanatory, they must specify *the psychological mechanisms* that cause a social behavior. This, however, only places only a minimal constraint on explanation; this constraint is minimal because Elster leaves his explanation of mechanisms ambiguous, merely noting that they are “frequently occurring and easily recognizable causal patterns that are triggered under generally unknown conditions or with indeterminate consequences” (p. 36).

Although the explanation of mechanisms is left ambiguous, it is clear that Elster does not intend to use the term as it is often used in the cognitive sciences. For Elster, mechanisms must temporally precede the behavior that they cause; they must be intentional in order to explain rational actions; and, although they allow us to explain, they do not allow us to predict social behavior. These mechanisms merely specify the general causal-*cum*-intentional patterns that underwrite our understanding of rational action. This brings me to the heart of Elster's account of social explanation. As with his previous work, Elster continues to hold that the paradigmatic case of an explanation in the social sciences is the demonstration that an action was performed because it was a rational thing to do (p. 53). However, Elster also holds that “proverbial folk wisdom has identified many such patterns” (p. 37). So, ‘absence makes the heart grow fonder’, ‘opposites attract’, and ‘revenge is a dish best served cold’ are seen by Elster as the *mechanisms that explain social behavior*.

Those familiar with Elster's previous work may be surprised to find him relying so heavily on proverbial folk-wisdom instead of the more rigorous models of rationality recommended by rational choice theory. Yet, despite this change in focus, rational choice theory and game theory play important roles in the Elster's model of social scientific explanation. Although Elster does recant his unmitigated support for rational choice theory, much of *Explaining Social Behavior* (chaps. 11–12, 18–25) is dedicated to providing an *introduction to* the tools that rational choice theorists and game theorists use, as well as recounting many of the well-known objections to rational choice theory and game theory. Elster continues to hold rational choice theory in high esteem, as providing insight into some of the nuts and bolts of human behavior; however, such models are not seen as providing the mechanisms that explain social behavior.

It would, however, be a mistake to think that Elster wants to replace rational choice theory with appeals to proverbial folk-wisdom. In fact, Elster explicitly acknowledges that unreconstructed folk-psychology “*is demonstrably false*” (p. 179). In developing this argument, Elster also borrows some tools from situationist social psychology—attempting to understand the constraints on rational interpretation (p. 178ff). Elster concedes that many explanations of social

behavior will be “found in the *situation* rather than in the *person*” (p. 183), and this concession seems to generate an internal tension within Elster’s explanatory model. After all, if action can only be explained by appeal to beliefs and desires, then it is unclear what role there is for situations to play in this model. However, Elster intends only to recognize that situational variables can shape “behavior by affecting the salience of competing *desires*” (p. 185). Elster thus assumes, as he does at numerous points throughout the book, that although there may be mental states that are nonconscious, the only mental states that yield *rational behavior*, and hence the only ones that are explanatorily potent for social scientists, are those that play a role in conscious decision making. On this assumption, Elster remains committed to the claim that “rational choices” are the proprietary domain of the social sciences.

In order to bolster this claim, Elster argues that the idealizing assumptions required by an interpretive social science are justified by the fact that they map the sorts of people *we are trying to be* (p. 164). Even though people often fail to behave in the ways dictated by rationality, the strategies that people adopt in navigating their social world are bound to be grounded in psychological mechanisms that can be rationally inferred from their behavior. This is why interpretation that is done well yields insight into the mechanisms of human psychology and individual choices: for it is “nothing but a special case of the hypothetico-deductive method” (p. 52).

Elster’s model is neatly constructed. However, there are numerous difficulties with the claim that social scientific explanation requires an appeal to individual psychological mechanisms; and even more problems with understanding these mechanisms in the terms of proverbial folk-wisdom. To begin with, social scientists often appeal to aggregate-level entities, rather than to mere individuals, in explaining social behavior (e.g., markets, institutions, and families). A rich tradition in the philosophy of social science has argued against the methodological individualism advanced by Elster, claiming that this assumption precludes explanation of numerous phenomena within the purview of the social sciences (Brodbeck, [1958](#); Gilbert, [1989](#); Kinkaid, [1986](#); Mandelbaum, [1955](#); Wilson, [1995](#)). Elster offers no argument for his methodological individualism, nor does he offer any reply to the arguments advanced by the anti-individualists. This assumption, seen by Elster as a driving “insight,” thus appears unwarranted.

More importantly, adopting methodological individualism comes at a high cost. Elster treats rational individuals as stable and immutable entities, going so far as to claim that the “beliefs held by one person owe little to those held or expressed by others” (p. 372). Elster thus neglects many advances made within his preferred paradigm of a social science: economics. While Elster’s concessions to situationist psychology suggest that rationality is bounded, this is not enough to explain how choices emerge under conditions of uncertainty. As Denzau and North ([1995](#)) argue, the traditional economic theory preferred by Elster explains choice in some experimental situations and in some posted-price markets; however, these models are unaffected if the choices are replaced by random responses, for “most efficiency gains in some resource allocation situations may be attributable to institutional details, independent of their effects on rational traders” (Denzau & North, [1995](#), 5). In numerous cases institutional setting, rather than individual choices explain social behavior.

Elster attempts to buttress his assumption of methodological individualism by claiming that the hand waving appeals to “social selection” and “social evolution” that we often find in the social sciences are “too lacking in precision and focus to be taken seriously” (p. 260). There may be reason to eschew talk of social evolution when it is articulated as an underdeveloped theory of mimetics; however, rigorous models of social evolution do exist. The mathematical models developed by Robert Boyd and Peter Richerson ([2005](#)) in order to explain the evolution of cooperation and the transmission of cultural norms are conspicuously absent from Elster’s analysis. While there are numerous places to disagree with Boyd and Richerson, their research *cannot* be dismissed as “lacking in precision and focus.”

Elster’s assumption that social science aims to explain only rational action also precludes explanation in terms of the subpersonal mechanisms that generate many of our behaviors. As should be quite familiar by now, many social scientists are concerned with the ways in which mechanisms operating outside of consciousness generate social behavior (Bargh, Chen, & Burrows, [1996](#); Corell, Benad, & Paik, [2007](#); Faucher, Machery, & Kelly, in preparation; MacRae & Boddenhausen, [2000](#); Steele & Aronson, [1995](#); Steinpreis, Anders, & Ritzk, [1999](#)). Many

nonconscious mechanisms yield implicit bias, propagate stereotypes, and structure our social world. It seems strange to claim that the social sciences should not be concerned with the operation of nonconscious mechanisms. Elster, of course, demurs, arguing that although there may be unconscious mechanisms that cause behavior, there is no “evidence that they can also cause instrumentally rational behavior” (p. 74). While this may be true, it is unclear why this counts as a response. After all, there is little reason to think that the social sciences are, or should be, concerned only with choice-behavior even on the assumption that rationality plays an important role in explaining social behavior.

Finally, Elster assumes that social scientific explanation occurs on only one level; unfortunately, this means that he must be satisfied with the ‘how possibly’ explanations of proverbial folk-wisdom rather than moving to the ‘how actually’ explanations we should expect in the social sciences. Elster claims that we cannot know “which conditions will trigger conformism or anticonformism, wishful thinking or counterwishful (countermotivated) thinking, adaptive preferences (sour grapes) or counteradaptive preferences (the grass is greener)” (p. 39). However, this shows us why proverbial folk-wisdom offers an unacceptably weak model for explaining social behavior. The social sciences are supposed to explain *why* we behave as we do. So far as I can tell, only a multi-leveled understanding of the social sciences that integrates the results of various sciences (ranging from biology and psychology to the dynamic modeling of group-level phenomena and the computational modeling of distributed cognition) will offer viable, though incredibly complicated explanations of social behavior. By trying to offer a clear and concise model for social scientific explanation, Elster has neglected many of its nuts and bolts.