NUTS AND BOLTS FOR THE SOCIAL SCIENCES
Nuts and Bolts
for the Social Sciences

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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

MANY years ago I read about a book by a nineteenth-century German mathematician, Felix Klein, called *Elementary Mathematics from an Advanced Standpoint*. I never read it, but the title stuck in my mind. The present book could perhaps be subtitled *Elementary Social Science from an Advanced Standpoint*.

Or should it be the other way around – advanced social science from an elementary standpoint? In that case, my model would be a short and wonderful book by Richard Feynman, *QED*, an introduction to quantum electrodynamics for the general public. The comparison is not as presumptuous as one might think. On the one hand, Feynman’s ability to go to the core of a subject, without technicalities but also without loss of rigor, may be unsurpassed in the history of science and is in any case beyond mine. On the other, quantum electrodynamics is more arcane than any of the topics discussed here. On balance, therefore, the reader may find my exposition just as intelligible.

The purpose of the book is reflected in its title: to introduce the reader to causal mechanisms that serve as the basic units of the social sciences. Though not a do-it-yourself kit, it might serve as a read-it-yourself kit for further study. The reader should be wary of the chapter on reinforcement, a topic about which I know little but which is too important to be neglected. I hope what I say is correct, but people who know more about it may find it superficial.

A word about style. I have tried to avoid flogging dead horses or belaboring the obvious; to be honest about the inevitable simplifications; to write simply and without jargon; to respect the reader’s intelligence as well as his ignorance. I rely on exam-
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Pies, diagrams and nontechnical expositions, since, with one exception, I don't think more is needed. The exception is the chapter on bargaining, which stands in the same relation to current research as a child's drawing to a photograph. My hope is that the other chapters are like impressionistic paintings, in which light and shade make up for lack of focus.

The many footnotes serve several functions. Mainly, they are reminders that things are more complicated than the main text might suggest. They point to links between chapters that might otherwise not be noticed. Or they discuss paradoxes and curiosities of the sort that social scientists love, often to excess.

"Elster" in German is "magpie," someone who steals other people's silver. Since there are no references to or mention of other people's work in the book, it may read as if all the ideas in it are my own. The Bibliographical Essay is intended partly to dispel that impression, partly to serve as a guide to further studies.

Like some of my other books, this one began as lectures at the University of Chicago. I am indebted to my students for pushing me to the wall whenever they got the air of an ambiguity, inconsistency or downright error. I also thank George Ainslie, Ingrid Creppell, Stephen Holmes, Arthur Stinchcombe and Cass Sunstein for their comments on an earlier version.