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978-0-521-77744-5 - Explaining Social Behavior: More Nuts and Bolts for the Social Sciences

Jon Elster

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION



This book is about explaining social behavior. In the first part, I spell out my conception of explanation, and in the remaining four parts, I construct a toolbox of concepts and mechanisms that apply to particular cases. Needless to say, it does not aspire to completeness. Rather than trying to spell out the gaps, which will be obvious, let me begin by enumerating a sample of the puzzles that, I submit, can be illuminated by the approach I am taking. In the Conclusion, I return to the same puzzles with brief references to the explanations I have cited in earlier chapters.

The examples and the explanations must be taken with two caveats. First, I do not claim that all the explananda are well-established facts. In an actual explanation, this is of course a crucial first step – it makes no sense to try to explain what does not exist. For the purpose of building a toolbox, however, one can be less rigorous. Second, even for the explananda whose existence is well documented I do not claim that the explanations I cite are the correct ones. I only claim that they satisfy a minimal condition for an explanation – that they logically imply the explananda. The puzzles and explanations are intended to show “if this kind of thing happens, here is the kind of mechanism that might explain it” as well as “if this mechanism operates, here is the kind of thing it can produce.” Given these caveats, here are the puzzles, arranged somewhat arbitrarily (since many puzzles could fit in several categories) according to the four substantive parts of the book.¹

I ⇐ The Mind

- Why do some gamblers believe that when red has come up five times in a row, red is more likely than black to come up next?

¹ Although the list overlaps somewhat with a list of puzzles presented in Chapter 12 as challenges to rational-choice theory, it has no polemical purpose, only that of inciting the reader's curiosity.

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- Why do other gamblers believe that when red has come up five times in a row, black is more likely than red to come up next?
- Why do preferences sometimes change through the sheer passage of time?
- Why do many people who seem to believe in the afterlife want it to arrive as late as possible?
- Why are people reluctant to acknowledge, to themselves and others, that they are envious?
- Why are people reluctant to acknowledge, to themselves and others, that they are ignorant?
- Why, among sixteenth-century converts to Calvinism, did the belief that people were predestined either to heaven or to hell induce greater peace of mind than the belief that one could achieve salvation through good works?
- Why is it (sometimes) true that “Who has offended, cannot forgive”?
- Why is shame more important than guilt in some cultures?
- Why did the French victory in the 1998 soccer World Cup generate so much joy in the country, and why did the fact that the French team did not qualify beyond the opening rounds in 2002 cause so much despondency?
- Why do women often feel shame after being raped?
- Why do humiliating rituals of initiation produce greater rather than lesser loyalty to the group into which one is initiated?

II Action

- Why do more Broadway shows receive standing ovations today than twenty years ago?
- Why may punishments increase rather than decrease the frequency of the behavior they target?

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- Why are people unwilling to break self-imposed rules even when it makes little sense to follow them?
- Why is the pattern of revenge “Two eyes for an eye” instead of “An eye for an eye”?
- Why is the long-term yield on stocks much larger than that on bonds (i.e., why does not the value of stocks rise to equalize the yields)?
- Why do suicide rates go down when dangerous medications are sold in blister packs rather than bottles?
- Why did none of thirty-eight bystanders call the police when Kitty Genovese was beaten to death?
- Why did some individuals hide or rescue Jews under the Nazi regimes?
- Why did President Chirac call early elections in 1997, only to lose his majority in parliament?
- Why are some divorcing parents willing to share child custody even when their preferred solution is sole custody, which they are likely to get were they to litigate?
- Why are poor people less likely to emigrate?
- Why do some people save in Christmas accounts that pay no interest and do not allow for withdrawal before Christmas?
- Why do people pursue projects, such as building the Concorde airplane, that have negative expected value?
- Why, in “transitional justice” (when agents of an autocratic regime are put on trial after the transition to democracy), are those tried immediately after the transition sentenced more severely than those who are tried later?
- Why, in Shakespeare’s play, does Hamlet delay taking revenge until the last act?

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III Lessons from the Natural Sciences

- Why are parents much more likely to kill adopted children and stepchildren than to kill their biological children?
- Why is sibling incest so rare, given the temptations and opportunities?
- Why do people invest their money in projects undertaken by other agents even when the latter are free to keep all the profits for themselves?
- Why do people take revenge at some material cost to them and with no material benefits?
- Why do people jump to conclusions beyond what is warranted by the evidence?

IV Interaction

- Why do supporters of a Socialist party sometimes vote Communist and thereby prevent their party from winning?
- Why do some newly independent countries adopt as their official language that of their former imperialist oppressor?
- Why are ice cream stalls often located beside each other in the middle of the beach, when customers would be better off and the sellers no worse off with a more spread-out location?
- Why does an individual vote in elections when his or her vote is virtually certain to have no effect on the outcome?
- Why are economically successful individuals in modern Western societies usually slimmer than the average person?
- Why do people refrain from transactions that could make everybody better off, as when they abstain from asking a person in the front of a bus queue whether he is willing to sell his place?

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- Why did President Nixon try to present himself to the Soviets as being prone to irrational behavior?
- Why do military commanders sometimes burn their bridges (or their ships)?
- Why do people often attach great importance to intrinsically insignificant matters of etiquette?
- Why do passengers tip taxi drivers and customers tip waiters even when visiting a foreign city to which they do not expect to return?
- Why do firms invest in large inventories even when they do not anticipate any interruption of production?
- Why, in a group of students, would each think that others have understood an obscure text better than he has?
- Why are votes in many political assemblies taken by roll call?
- Why is logrolling more frequent in ordinary legislatures than in constituent assemblies?

Suggested explanations for these phenomena will be provided at various places in the book and briefly summarized in the Conclusion. Here I only want to make a general remark about two types of explanation that are *not* likely to be useful. As readers will see in the very first chapter, with several reminders along the road, one of the aims of the book is to inculcate skepticism toward two common lines of reasoning. First, with very few exceptions the social sciences cannot rely on functional explanation, which accounts for actions or behavioral patterns by citing their consequences rather than their causes. Do norms of tipping exist because it is more efficient to have customers monitor waiters than to have the owner do it? I do not think so. Second, I now believe that rational-choice theory has less explanatory power than I used to think. Do real people act on the calculations that make up many pages of mathematical appendixes in leading journals? I do not think so.

On three counts at least, rational-choice theory is nevertheless a valuable part of the toolbox. If understood in a qualitative commonsense

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way, it is capable of explaining much everyday behavior. Even when it does not explain much, it can have immense conceptual value. Game theory, in particular, has illuminated the structure of social interaction in ways that go far beyond the insights achieved in earlier centuries. Finally, human beings *want* to be rational. The desire to have sufficient reasons for one's behavior, and not simply be the plaything of psychic forces acting "behind one's back," provides a permanent counterforce to the many irrationality-generating mechanisms that I survey in this book.

Even though I am critical of many rational-choice explanations, I believe the concept of *choice* is fundamental. In the book I consider several alternatives to choice-based explanation and conclude that although they may sometimes usefully supplement that approach, they cannot replace it. The fact that people act under different *constraints*, for instance, can often explain a great deal of variation in behavior. Also, in some cases one may argue that *selection of agents* rather than *choice by agents* is responsible for the behavior we observe. By and large, however, I believe that the subjective factor of choice has greater explanatory power than the objective factors of constraints and selection. This is obviously an intuition that cannot be proved in any rigorous sense, and in any case social scientists ought to have room for all the factors in their toolbox.



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I

EXPLANATION AND MECHANISMS



This book relies on a specific view about explanation in the social sciences. Although not primarily a work of philosophy of social science, it draws upon and advocates certain methodological ideas about how to explain social phenomena. In the first three chapters, these ideas are set out explicitly. In the rest of the book they mostly form part of the implicit background, although from time to time, notably in Chapters 14 through 17 and in the Conclusion, they return to the center of the stage.

I argue that all explanation is causal. To explain a phenomenon (an *explanandum*) is to cite an earlier phenomenon (the *explanans*) that caused it. When advocating causal explanation, I do not intend to exclude the possibility of intentional explanation of behavior. Intentions can serve as causes. A particular variety of intentional explanation is *rational-choice explanation*, which will be extensively discussed in later chapters. Many intentional explanations, however, rest on the assumption that agents are, in one way or another, *irrational*. In itself, irrationality is just a negative or residual idea, everything that is not rational. For the idea to have any explanatory purchase, we need to appeal to specific forms of irrationality with specific implications for behavior. In Chapter 12, for instance, I enumerate and illustrate eleven mechanisms that can generate irrational behavior.

Sometimes, scientists explain phenomena by their *consequences* rather than by their causes. They might say, for instance, that blood feuds are explained by the fact that they keep populations down at sustainable levels. This might seem a metaphysical impossibility: how can the

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existence or occurrence of something at one point in time be explained by something that has not yet come into existence? As we shall see, the problem can be restated so as to make explanation by consequences a meaningful concept. In the biological sciences, evolutionary explanation offers an example. In the social sciences, however, successful instances of such explanation are few and far between. The blood-feud example is definitely not one of them.

The natural sciences, especially physics and chemistry, offer *explanations by law*; laws are general propositions that allow us to infer the truth of one statement at one time from the truth of another statement at some earlier time. Thus when we know the positions and the velocity of the planets at one time, the laws of planetary motion enable us to deduce and predict their positions at any later time. This kind of explanation is *deterministic*: given the antecedents, only one consequent is possible. The social sciences offer few if any law-like explanations of this kind. The relation between explanans and explanandum is not one-one or many-one, but one-many or many-many. Many social scientists try to model this relation by using *statistical* methods. Statistical explanations are incomplete by themselves, however, since they ultimately have to rely on intuitions about plausible causal *mechanisms*.



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Chapter 1

EXPLANATION

*Explanation: General*

The main task of the social sciences is to explain social phenomena. It is not the only task, but it is the most important one, to which others are subordinated or on which they depend. The basic type of explanandum is an *event*. To explain it is to give an account of why it happened, by citing an *earlier event* as its cause. Thus we may explain Ronald Reagan's victory in the 1980 presidential elections by Jimmy Carter's failed attempt to rescue the Americans held hostage in Iran.¹ Or we might explain the outbreak of World War II by citing any number of earlier events, from the Munich agreement to the signing of the Versailles Treaty. Even though in both cases the fine structure of the causal explanation will obviously be more complex, they do embody the basic *event-event* pattern of explanation. In a tradition originating with David Hume, it is often referred to as the "billiard-ball" model of causal explanation. One event, ball A hitting ball B, is the cause of – and thus explains – another event, namely, ball B's beginning to move.

Those who are familiar with the typical kind of explanation in the social sciences may not recognize this pattern, or not see it as privileged. In one way or another, social scientists tend to put more emphasis on *facts*, or states of affairs, than on events. The sentence "At 9 A.M. the road was slippery" states a fact. The sentence "At 9 A.M. the car went off the road" states an event. As this example suggests, one might offer a *fact-event* explanation to account for a car accident.² Conversely, one might propose an *event-fact* explanation to account for a given state of affairs, as when asserting that the attack on the World Trade Center in 2001

¹ To anticipate a distinction discussed later, note that, Carter did not *fail to attempt* but *attempted and failed*. A nonaction such as a failure to attempt cannot have causal efficacy, except in the indirect sense that if others perceive or infer that the agent fails to act, they may take actions that they otherwise would not have.

² The voter turnout example discussed later provides another illustration.

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explains the pervasive state of fear of many Americans. Finally, standard social-science explanations often have a *fact-fact* pattern. To take an example at random, it has been claimed that the level of education of women explains per capita income in the developing world.

Let us consider the explanation of one particular fact, that 65 percent of Americans favor, or say that they favor, the death penalty.³ In principle, this issue can be restated in terms of events: How did these Americans *come to favor* the death penalty? What were the formative events – interactions with parents, peers, or teachers – that caused this attitude to emerge? In practice, social scientists are usually not interested in this question. Rather than trying to explain a brute statistic of this kind, they want to understand *changes* in attitudes over time or *differences* in attitudes across populations. The reason, perhaps, is that they do not think the brute fact very informative. If one asks whether 65 percent is much or little, the obvious retort is, “Compared to what?” Compared to the attitudes of Americans around 1990, when about 80 percent favored the death penalty, it is a low number. Compared to the attitudes in some European countries, it is a high number.

Longitudinal studies consider variations over time in the dependent variable. *Cross-sectional* studies consider variations across populations. In either case, the explanandum is transformed. Rather than trying to explain the phenomenon “in and of itself,” we try to explain how it varies in time or space. The success of an explanation is measured, in part, by how much of the “variance” (a technical measure of variation) it can account for.⁴ Complete success would explain all observed variation. In a cross-national study we might find, for instance, that the percentage of individuals favoring the death penalty was strictly proportional to the number of homicides per 100,000 inhabitants. Although this finding would provide *no* explanation of the absolute numbers, it would offer a *perfect* explanation of the difference among them.⁵ In practice, of course,

³ Answers fluctuate. Also, the number of people who favor the death penalty for murder goes down drastically when life imprisonment without parole is stated as the alternative.

⁴ As economists sometimes say, they are interested only in what happens “at the margin.”

⁵ Strictly speaking, the causal chain might go in the other direction, from attitudes to behavior, but in this case that hypothesis is implausible.