Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-10352-7 - The Content of Social Explanation
Susan James
Excerpt
More information

Introduction

This book is about two divergent types of social explanation, and the reasons that are given, and might be given, for favouring one approach over the other. One of the most startling features of the social world is its variety: the assortment of diets, laws, courtesies, kinship systems and rulers it contains is bound to strike us, and the things we should like to understand about it are correspondingly diverse, ranging from a fascination with the foibles of the Russian czars to a desire to empathise with the perception of the Other among the Boogys. But when we are not glorying in its eclecticism, our attempts to impose order on the social world continually hark back to the categories of the individual and society. Competing social theories embody incompatible conceptions of the relations between these two, and the terms themselves are characterised in all sorts of ways. Some of their features, however, are intuitively plain, such as the observation – usually taken for granted – that if a society is regarded as forming some sort of unit or whole, then individuals are among its parts. Individuals and societies stand in a particular relation to one another: that of parts to wholes. But the character and consequences of this apparently obvious connection have been the subject of a fierce and protracted debate, which still rages among social scientists and philosophers. In the following chapters I first analyse the arguments offered on both sides, and then show how they can be transcended, and the problem resolved.

The question of how individuals are related to the array of rules, institutions, roles and so forth – which for the moment can be called societies – gives rise to a view of social explanation known as holism. In the course of its recent history the term, amoeba-like, has sometimes encompassed a number of what were previously seen as distinct claims and has unified them into a single view, while at other times it has come to have a more restricted meaning, as parts of the doctrine have split off again. Currently, I think it is fair to say, there exist two separate and well-identified conceptions of what holism is, which bear very differently on the part-whole relation between individuals and societies. The divide between them is really less absolute than it is at first prone to appear (a fact which accounts for their amoeboid cycle of development), and in the course of this book some of the ways in which they are connected will become plain. But before these links can be appreciated, one must grasp the two views, each of which claims that a particular kind of holist theory is better suited than its rival to explaining the behaviour of individuals, societies, and the relations between them.

Advocates of the first variety of holism, which I shall call *holism of content*, are impressed by the way in which the characteristics of social wholes are qualitatively distinct from the characteristics of their parts.[1] Just as, for a student of animal behaviour, the salient features of parrots are not those of their internal organs, the properties of markets which interest many economists are not those of individual buyers and sellers; and it is therefore natural to ask whether such wholes as social groups can be satisfactorily analysed and understood by means of theories which deal primarily with their parts, or whether there is some discontinuity between entities of the two types which makes such an approach either impossible or inappropriate. Since societies just *are* collections of individuals, surely the character of the whole must be explicable as the outcome of its members' actions and dispositions. And yet a society has an autonomy and history in the face of which individuals sometimes seem powerless and insignificant. Of these two views, both deeply-rooted in our intuitions, holists of content defend the second, arguing that an adequate social theory

[1] This conviction gives rise to the doctrine of emergence, which I do not discuss. See Gustave Bergmann, 'Holism, Historicism and Emergence', *Philosophy of Science* 4 (1944) pp.209–21; A. Garnett, 'Scientific Method and the Concept of Emergence', *Journal of Philosophy* 39 (1942) pp.477–86; P. Henle, 'The Status of Emergence', *Journal of Philosophy* 39 (1942) pp.486–93; M. Mandelbaum, 'Note on Emergence' in W. Baron, E. Nagel, K. Pinson eds., *Freedom and Reason* (Glencoe, 1951) pp.175–83; J. Needham, *Time: The Refreshing River* (London, 1943); M. Brodbeck, 'Methodological Individualism: Definition and Reduction' in J. O'Neill ed. *Modes of Individualism and Collectivism* (London, 1973) pp.287–311; K.-D. Opp, 'Group Size, Emergence and Composition Laws: Are There Macroscopic Theories *sui generis*?', *The Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 9 (1979) pp.445–55; and R. Bhaskar, *The Possibility of Naturalism* (Brighton, 1979) pp.124–37.

must admit social wholes of some sort into its ontology, and that it will not prove possible to substitute for the explanations offered by such a theory explanations which do not appeal to the properties of wholes at all. Holism of content is therefore a general view about the *terms* of satisfactory social theories, but it can be defended on several grounds, some more respectful than others of the underlying part-whole distinction. On the one hand there are holists who believe that parts and wholes can be identified independently of one another, and that, as it happens, the properties of wholes yield more powerful explanations than do those of individual parts. This stand is usually accompanied by the further claim that theories about wholes are irreducible to theories about individuals so that an appeal to the whole is more than a convenience – it is an essential condition of understanding the social world.[2] On the other hand, there are holists who argue that the properties of individuals must be seen as a function of their place in societies. Their theories are necessarily holist as to content, in the sense that they appeal to the properties of wholes; but they attack the dichotomy between parts and wholes from which we began.[3]

This latter approach trenches on a second view, which I shall call *holism of form*. Unlike holism of content, holism of form does not concern the proper character of social theories. It is rather an account of the structure of theories, of the way in which their terms are related, and therefore applies quite generally to language, to the sciences, and to the mind, as well as to the social sciences. In itself this variety of holism constitutes a philosophical thesis which runs true to type in that it rests on a deceptively simple idea which is extremely difficult to spell out in detail.

Holism of form is a view about the relations between the terms of a theory: the view that each term owes its meaning to its relations with the others, so that they are all more or less closely interdefined, and a change in the meaning of one term will have repercussions for all the rest. Superficially this seems quite straightforward, but it has dramatic consequences for the way in which hypotheses are tested, consequences which are best appre-

[2] See Chapters II and III.
[3] See the discussion of Mandelbaum's position in Chapter III, and for a classic statement of this view, see F. H. Bradley, 'My Station and its Duties' in *Ethical Studies* 1st edition (London, 1876) p.158.

ciated by comparing holism of form to the empiricist approach, with which it can be sharply contrasted.[4] Suppose you want to know whether a particular hypothesis is true. According to the empiricist account, theories are deductively organised sets of laws and implications, and to test a hypothesis you have to see if it is supported by evidence independent of the theory. The available evidence is usually held to be of two sorts. First, there are observation statements, records of our perceptual experience which, because they are themselves untainted by theory, can be used to evaluate the truth or falsity of hypotheses. Second, there are analytic truths, propositions true by virtue of the meanings of their terms, which need no empirical confirmation. These are not used to test other claims directly, but they do restrict the range of propositions that can be admitted as true, for any true proposition must be consistent with them. Thus there are two fixed points from which to assess claims and find out their truth value: the world itself, and the meanings of terms. In both cases the process of testing is one of comparison: you find out if a claim corresponds to the facts, or you find out if it is consistent with pre-established analytical propositions.

Thoroughgoing holists of form deny that there are any facts or meanings which are not themselves 'theory-laden', and therefore repudiate this picture of the way theories are tested and built up.[5] Their rejection stems from the fundamental claim that the terms of theories are all interdefined, a claim which runs counter to the positivist distinction between theoretical claims and observation statements. For the meanings of even the most apparently observable terms such as 'square' or 'red' are said to derive not from their correspondence with a quality out there in the world, but from their place in theories which determine the criteria for squareness or redness. Thus our belief about whether or not a particular range of objects is red depends on other beliefs we hold, about, for example, the relation of light and colour, the spectrum, or the reliability of our senses.

Observation statements are therefore held to be not reflections

[4] For lucid accounts of this approach, see E. Nagel, *The Structure of Science* (London, 1961) Chapters III, IV, V, and C. Hempel, *The Philosophy of the Natural Sciences* (Englewood Cliffs, 1966).

[5] See P. Feyerabend, *Against Method* (London, 1978); T. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago, 1962); M. Hesse, *The Structure of Scientific Inference* (London, 1974), Chapter 1.

of reality, but, like other theoretical claims, interpretations of our experience offered in the light of our existing beliefs. And analytic truths suffer the same fate; for their meanings are not fixed once and for all.[6] The empiricist view of theories as made up of at least three different sorts of statements – analytic, theoretical and observation statements – is replaced by a more homogeneous analysis in which all statements get their meanings from their relations with the others, and none are immune from revision. The consequences for the traditional view of truth as correspondence are extremely serious. First, there is no independent standpoint from which to test claims; we must be content to rely on standards of evidence internal to theories themselves. Second, there is no neutral ground from which to compare theories, and we can only reject one from the standpoint of another.

The absence of any consensus about how to formulate this view in detail, how it applies to particular theories and what to do about it, gives holism of form a central position in current philosophy. Some of its advocates advise the undecided to lie back and enjoy it, give up the unrealisable quest for certainty, and recognise that standards of truth are a matter of social practice.[7] But it is more common to find philosophers puzzling over how to reconcile this view of the structure of theories with a conception of truth as a relation to the *world*.[8] And it is in this context that the term 'holism' is currently bandied about.

Holism of form is as much a feature of the social sciences as of anything else, and it has had a deep influence both on attempts to formulate theories in these disciplines and on efforts to understand those that already exist. The character of some of these projects will emerge in the course of this book. More important to the theme of holism in social theory, however, is the relation between the two kinds of holism I have identified – holism of form and holism of content. Because, in the history of philosophy, these

[6] See W. V. O. Quine, 'Two Dogmas of Empiricism' in *From a Logical Point of View* (Cambridge, Mass., 1953).
[7] See R. Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, 1979); N. Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking* (Hassocks, 1978).
[8] Defences of Realism are numerous. In the philosophy of language, see M. Dummett, 'What is a Theory of Meaning? (I)' in S. Guttenplan ed. *Mind and Language* (Oxford, 1975) pp.97–138 and 'What is a Theory of Meaning? (II)' in G. Evans and J. McDowell, eds. *Truth and Meaning* (Oxford, 1976); In the philosophy of science see J. Leplin ed. *Essays on Scientific Realism* (Notre Dame, 1983); W. H. Newton-Smith, *The Rationality of Science* (London, 1981).

have often been linked and sometimes fused, they are often thought to be inseparable. But this is misleading, since the two are in fact logically distinct; it is perfectly possible to conceive of a theory which is holist as to form and individualist as to content,[9] and equally possible to hold a view which allows theories that are individualist in form yet holist in content. When philosophers of language, or of science, discuss holism it is holism of form that concerns them. But, perhaps surprisingly, this does not apply to the social sciences. In this field, more than most, the question of what kinds of theories it is possible or feasible to construct is so open that 'the problem of holism', as it is known, is a problem about holism of content: should social theories deal primarily with individuals or with groups? Since the various suggestions that are offered are based on conflicting evaluations of holism of form, the latter cannot be completely ignored; but is not the main focus of interest, and the following discussion will centre on holism of content.

Once these two kinds of holism have been prised apart, it becomes evident that some of the existing literature obscures an already complex issue by conflating them. Even work which focusses on holism of content, moreover, is frequently misleading. For although it poses the question of how the terms of holist theories are related to those of individualist ones, it does so in a peculiarly rigid form which has given rise to a fruitless and inconclusive debate. The problem of holism has usually been identified with the question of whether theories about social wholes can be *reduced* to those about individuals, and in the first two chapters I begin by setting out this established approach. I argue that it fails to resolve the problem it sets itself, and in Chapter III go on to trace this deficiency to the fact that the traditional debate mistakes the nature of the difference between holists and individualists. By concentrating on the notion of reduction, it misses a deeper and more important divide: holism and individualism are based on competing views about the nature of individuals, each of which gives rise to a distinctive account of how to explain the social world. In the light of this insight the problem can be seen afresh. Rather than having to do with the various criteria for the reducibility of theories, it is concerned with the relationship between, and comparative power of, two kinds

[9] See C. Peacocke, *Holistic Explanation* (Oxford, 1979).

of causal analysis: those that appeal to the properties of social wholes to account for features of individuals on the one hand, and those that seek to explain the characteristics of social wholes as the outcome of individual traits on the other.

Of these two views, individualism is the more intuitively familiar. Indeed, its hold over our imaginations is so strong that it is often regarded as invincible in the face of the holist challenge.[10] How, it is asked, could we give up our conception of ourselves as agents who can shake the world, and instead come to see individuals as pawns in the palm of society? The conviction that we could never make this transition, allied to a terror of the possibility that we might, has both strengthened the persuasiveness of individualism and given the problem of holism a certain shape. The individualist side of the argument has had the upper hand, and holism has been cast in a defensive role.

This bias may to some extent have drawn support from those analytical philosophers who have made the explanation of action the focus of their work. Like their colleagues in the social sciences, they tend to have individualist intuitions, and have thus favoured an individualist approach which links the understanding of action to a series of moral issues, of which the attribution of responsibility is the most prominent.[11] The sheer quantity of effort which has gone into this project, as well as the interest of its conclusions, have made it extremely influential. But its impact on the philosophy of the social sciences has not been altogether positive, and it has contributed to two unfortunate consequences.

First, the dominance of this approach has meant that individualist criteria for the explanation of action have come to be used in a manner that is merely stipulative. To cite the intentions, desires and so forth of individual agents is commonly regarded as *the* way to explain their actions,[12] so that holism, because it does not adopt these standards, is at once assumed to be inadequate.

[10] See Chapter III.

[11] See for example, H. L. A. Hart, 'The Ascription of Responsibility and Rights', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 49 (1948–9) pp.171–94; H. L. A. Hart and A. Honoré, *Causation and the Law* (Oxford, 1959); J. L. Austin, 'A Plea for Excuses' in *Philosophical Papers* (Oxford, 1961); J. Feinberg 'Action and Responsibility' in *The Philosophy of Action* ed. A. R. White (Oxford, 1968).

[12] Among distinguished exponents of this approach are E. Anscombe, *Intention* (Oxford, 1957); A. Kenny, *Action, Emotion and Will* (London, 1963); I. Melden, *Free Action* (London, 1961); D. Davidson, 'Actions, Reasons and Causes' in A. R. White, ed. *The Philosophy of Action*, pp.79–94.

If it is true, however, that the persuasiveness of individualism rests largely on its coincidence with our intuitions, to accept this view is to allow that social explanation is a fundamentally intuitive business. Never mind how the social world actually works, so long as we can hang on to our entrenched self-perceptions. But this is hardly satisfactory. Only by becoming aware of the assumptions implicit in individualism will we be able to adopt a more sceptical stance, one that will free us to ask why our intuitive sense of human character should be allowed to determine the nature of the theories we develop about the social world, and will thereby enable us to reconsider the merits of a holist approach. In Chapter III I therefore lay out those assumptions of individualism that stand in need of scrutiny, and identify an alternative set of holist premises, ripe for investigation.

As well as making individualism the norm, the mutual agreement between social theorists and philosophers as to how actions are to be explained falls foul of a second danger – that of cutting social theory off from whole areas of social science. When individualists want to show that their view is upheld in practice, they frequently turn to the models of rational choice used by economists.[13] But there are also sociologists, anthropologists and historians who do not espouse the underlying principle of individualism, and to broaden our understanding of the social world we must be receptive to the insights their work provides.[14] However, the existence of a strong consensus as to the superiority of individualism means that these tend to be discounted. Like any deeply entrenched view, individualism is inclined to be self-sustaining, and one of the costs of this has been the lack of much cross-fertilisation between the conclusions drawn by theorists and the views arrived at by practitioners. The second part of this book therefore aims to overcome the conventional impasse between holism and individualism by studying a range of holist explanations. In place of the well-worn strategy of finding out whether

[13] See J. Elster, 'Marxism, Functionalism and Game Theory: the Case for Methodological Individualism', *Theory and Society* 11 (1982) pp.453–82; G. A. Cohen, 'Reply to Elster on Marxism, Functionalism and Game Theory', *Theory and Society* 11 (1982) pp.483–95; J. Roemer, 'Methodological Individualism and Deductive Materialism', *Theory and Society* 11 (1982) pp.513–20; J. Berger and C. Offe, 'Functionalism and Rational Choice', *Theory and Society* 11 (1982) pp.521–6.

[14] See Part II.

the social sciences live up to standards set by philosophy, it aims to extract theory from practice – to learn from the social sciences themselves about the strengths and limits of holism.

As a means of highlighting the defining characteristics of a fully holist approach, Part II begins by investigating the theory that stands most unequivocally at one end of the spectrum of contemporary views about holism and individualism: the unqualified and unapologetically holistic theory of Louis Althusser. In Chapter IV, I explain the nature of Althusser's project, and point out some of the problems to which it gives rise. In Chapter V, I then take up the most important of the attempts which have been made to overcome these difficulties and thus to develop the Althusserean approach: an attempt embodied in the work of Nikos Poulantzas.

I argue that these theories, deeply suggestive though they are, remain open to extremely serious objections. My first general conclusion, therefore, is that, in the form in which it has been most ambitiously presented in contemporary social philosophy, a fully holistic account of social explanation does not succeed. This does not, however, leave individualism in possession of the stage. On the contrary, I devote my last chapter to elaborating a more concessive form of holism, one that is capable of taking account of the criticisms levelled at a fully holistic approach, without sliding back into endorsing an individualist point of view. Holism and individualism, I argue, must be seen as separate explanatory projects, each guided by an underlying *interest* in relation to which questions are asked and theories assessed. This interpretation undercuts the claim that there is an *a priori* case in favour of individualism, thus recasting the problem of holism as a dispute between equal parties, and at the same time suggesting a way of resolving the problem by adopting a pragmatic and explicitly normative account of social explanation. The main conclusion of this study is that this form of concessive holism in fact represents a more fruitful approach to social explanation than its rivals, and thus that individualism must relinquish its current hegemony.

PART I

Theory: two views of holism