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978-1-107-07118-6 - Explaining Social Behavior: More Nuts and Bolts for the Social Sciences:

Revised Edition

Jon Elster

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## Explaining Social Behavior

*More Nuts and Bolts for the Social Sciences*

Revised edition

In this new edition of his critically acclaimed book, Jon Elster examines the nature of social behavior, proposing choice as the central concept of the social sciences. Extensively revised throughout, the book offers an overview of key explanatory mechanisms, drawing on many case studies and experiments to explore the nature of explanation in the social sciences; an analysis of the mental states – beliefs, desires, and emotions – that are precursors to action; a systematic comparison of rational-choice models of behavior with alternative accounts, and a review of mechanisms of social interaction ranging from strategic behavior to collective decision making. A wholly new chapter includes an exploration of classical moralists and Proust in charting mental mechanisms operating “behind the back” of the agent, and a new conclusion points to the pitfalls and fallacies in current ways of doing social science, proposing guidelines for more modest and more robust procedures.

JON ELSTER is Robert K. Merton Professor of Social Science at Columbia University and Professeur Honoraire at the Collège de France. He is the author or editor of thirty-four books, most recently *Agir contre soi: la faiblesse de volonté* (2007), *Le désintéressement: traité critique de l'homme économique* (2009), *Alexis de Tocqueville: The First Social Scientist* (Cambridge, 2009), *L'irrationalité* (2010), and *Securities against Misrule: Juries, Assemblies, Elections* (Cambridge, 2013).

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*Columbia University*



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To the memory of Aaron Swartz

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## Preface

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The first edition of this work was an extension of a much shorter book, *Nuts and Bolts for the Social Sciences*. By and large, the extension was in breadth, not in depth. Many more topics were covered, but at more or less the same level of analysis. This revised edition covers roughly the same topics as the first, but provides, I hope, greater insight.

To make room for the substantial amount of new material, while keeping the book within a manageable size, Part IV – “Lessons from the natural sciences” – has been eliminated. Some discussions in that Part have been incorporated into the new Chapter 11, “Reinforcement and selection,” and Chapter 20. A new chapter on “Transmutations” is added. The chapters in Part V on collective belief formation, collective action, collective decision making, institutions and constitutions, as well as the Conclusion, are entirely rewritten. Most chapters in Part II are also substantially modified. Parts I and III are also revised, but less heavily.

The revisions and additions draw on five books I have published in the meantime: *Agir contre soi* (2007), *Le désintéressement* (2009), *Alexis de Tocqueville: The First Social Scientist* (2009), *L'irrationalité* (2010), and *Securities Against Misrule* (2013). They also reflect a deeper immersion in Seneca, Tocqueville, Bentham, and Proust, as well as a belated first reading of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Hume's *History of England*, and Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. A number of books on the American war in Vietnam opened my eyes to the importance of stupidity, however intelligent, in human affairs.

In revising the book, I have given free rein to associations and digressions. My role models in this respect are Montaigne's *Essays*, *The Psychology of Interpersonal Relations* by Fritz Heider, *The Strategy of Conflict* by Thomas Schelling, and *The New Rhetoric* by Chaim Perelman and Lucie-Olbrechts-Tyteca. However different in substance, these books have in common a playful obsession with revealing details, even seemingly trivial ones, superimposed on the analytical structure.

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A distinctive feature of this edition will appear when Chapter 9 is read in conjunction with the Conclusion. One might call it the *naturalization of social scientists*, in the sense that I understand many writings by social scientists as instances of the kind of spurious pattern seeking that both natural and social scientists have found to characterize human beings much more generally. I cannot stress enough that this explanation of their explanations is not intended to refute them (this would amount to “the genetic fallacy”). Refutations must follow standard methodological procedures. Yet I believe that the sheer mass of substandard social science – what I call soft and hard obscurantism – calls for an explanation.

My quotations from Proust are taken from the translation by Scott-Moncrieff, occasionally modified either for a more literal rendering or for greater transparency. I thank Herbert Gintis, Aanund Hylland, Yuen Foong Khong, George Loewenstein, Karl Ove Moene, David Stasavage, Adrian Vermeule and Adam Waytz for their comments on an earlier draft.

I dedicate the revised edition to the memory of Aaron Swartz, for his commitment to the public good.