Agency and Recent Philosophy of Social Science

The Most Troublesome Assumption

There is perhaps no assumption which has created greater havoc for the human sciences than the idea, provoked by the new physics of the 17th century, that everything that happens is governed by law. The Physiocrat, Francois Quesnay said it well: 'All social facts are linked together in the bond of eternal, immutable, ineluctable, inevitable laws, which individuals and government would obey if they were once known to them' (Randall, 1940, p. 323). But if so, as Kant insisted, we must distinguish the phenomenal, the realm of the laws of nature, from the noumenal, the realm of freedom. For indeed, if human actions are 'determined' by natural laws, human agency is illusory. Two hundred years later, Vilfredo Pareto repeated this idea, but with the advantages over Quesnay's Tableau of the simultaneous equations of general equilibrium theory. Pareto was ready to admit that we are unlikely to be able to predict behavior with the accuracy that we can predict the positions of the planets. The problem was not one of principle, but, as writers from Mill on have assumed, there were too many 'variables,' nothing more. The economic system was but 'a small fraction of the social system as a whole,' but even in the case of 100 individuals and 700 goods, there would be 70,699 conditions...We would need to solve a system of 70,699 equations' (1906, para 217). One did not need the computational capacity of today's machines to have one's soul chilled by the prospect. Those that did drew opposite conclusions. Thus, Collingwood: 'This at least is certain: that, so far as our scientific and historical knowledge goes, the processes of events which constitute the world of nature are altogether different in kind from the processes of thought which constitute the world of history' (p. 14). It is fair to say, I think, that every major opposition in the philosophy of the social sciences has its roots in the problem of human agency. A brief review of discussions in the recent past will show this.

The Covering Law Model

Consider, first, the argument of the nineteen fifties and sixties over the relevance or irrelevance of the covering law model of scientific explanation, the clearest expression of the idea that events are 'governed' by law. Against Hempel and Oppenheim. William Dray insisted that explanation in history involved 'rational explanation' and that 'the establishment of a deductive logical connnection between the explanans and the explanadum, based on the inclusion of suitable empirical laws in the former, is neither a necessary or sufficient condition of explaining (p 306). His point was that it was an error to suppose that motives and beliefs could be construed as 'antecedent conditions' of a lawlike hypotheticals in the fashion of the covering law model. Peter Winch, and then Alan Donagan, following Collingwood, argued that no general laws were presupposed since rational explanations employ analytic truths, not falsifiable by any conceivable empirical evidence. Winch, drawing on the later Wittgenstein, argued that those who hold that explanations of human behavior must appeal to causal generalizations must assume that 'the concepts and criterion according to which the sociologist judges that, in two situations, the same thing has happened, or the same action performed, must be understood in relation to the the rules governing sociological investigation.' But since 'what the sociologist is studying, as well as his study of it, is a human activity and is therefore carried on according to rules,' it is just these rules which determine what is to count as 'doing the same kind of thing in relation to that kind of activity' (p. 320). He went to conclude that because social relations were internal, 'historical explanation is not the application of generalizations and theories to particular instances; it is the tracing of internal relations'-- akin to 'applying one's knowledge of a language in order to understand a conversation rather than like applying one's knowledge of mechanics to understand the workings of a watch' (p. 329).

It was no accident that it was just during this period that B.F. Skinner (1953) was making his

influential case for the idea that 'what a man (sic) does is the result of specifiable conditions and that once these conditions have been discovered, we can anticipate and to some extent determine his actions' (p. 6). It was just as this time also that that the Voice of America aired a series, later collected under the title The Behavioral Sciences Today (Berelson, 1963). In his introduction, Berelson noted that the term was new and that two criteria needed to be satisfied if a study was to be part of the 'behavioral sciences.' First, it must deal with human behavior and second, behavior must be studied 'scientifically.' 'Scientific' was glossed:

> The scientific aim is to establish generalizations about human behavior that are supported by empirical evidence collected in an impersonal and objective way...The ultimate end is to understand, explain, and predict human behavior in the same sense in which scientists understand, explain, and predict the behavior of physical forces...' (p. 3).

Berelson's assimilation of 'explain and predict' simply took the covering law model for granted--as did nearly everybody.

Intentionality

Winch's argument depended critically on seeing that empiricist philosophers of social science begged serious questions. Since beliefs have 'an internal connection with a way of living' it is absurd to assume that they can be looked at from 'the outside,' like the objects of nature. Thus Durkheim's first rule of sociological method, 'consider social facts as things' is absurd. So too was Pareto's assumption that the 'theories' held by persons were merely 'experimental facts' to be treated like any other. On the contrary, 'what the sociological observer has presented to his senses is not at all people holding theories, believing in certain propositions, but people making certain movements and sounds. Indeed, even describing them as people really goes too far, which may explain the popularity of the sociological and social psychological jargon word 'organism'...(p. 324).

This idea recurs in two other 1960s challenges to empiricist ideas of a human science, from so-called 'action theory' and from 'phenomenology,' which both showed marks of the influences of continental philosophies, but especially Brentano and Husserl. Action theory pursued the theme which Winch had touched on. To put matters briefly, it focused on the intentional character of action--in contrast to behavior. For example, Charles Taylor (1964) argued that 'the distinction between action and movement [involves] the notion of a center of responsibility which is inseperable from the notion of action' (pp. 55f.). Essential is the 'the notion of consciousness in the sense of intentionality' (p. 58). Books by Melden, Peters, Anscombe and others generated a small industry on the idea.

'Subjective'and 'Objective'

The same year that the Berelson volume appeared, a volume edited by Maurice Natanson (1963) also appeared. In his forward, Natanson articulated the principle which organized the volume:

> Two distinctly opposed philosophical attitudes are takem as polar positions underlying the social sciences: let, for want of satisfying alternatives, call them 'objective' and 'subjective' Weltanschauungen (p. viii).

This way of formulating the divide puts emphasis on the epistemological aspect of the relevant issues, taking aim both at empiricist notions of explanation and at empiricist notions of what counts as a 'social fact.' It put 'consciousness' in the forefront. In the Natanson volume, sociologist George Lundberg is put against Georg Simmel's neo-Kantianism, essays by Nagel and Hempel on concept formation are paired with an essay by Alfred Schutz on the same topic, and essay by A.J. Ayer is paired with one by Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Thelma Lavine's (perceptive) appeal for a 'naturalistically constructed method of Verstehen brought sharp rebuttals from both Nagel and Natanson. Nagel found her suggestion to be 'of questionable worth' and Natanson found it be, finally, incoherent: 'To revoke naturalistic criteria as

correctives for a reconstructed naturalistic method is to step forward and follow with a step back.' For Natanson, since Verstehen was 'foundational,' the 'way out' was 'the transcension of naturalism in favor of a phenomenological standpoint.'

Critique of 'the Standard View'

While person-oriented phenomenology won adherents (Rogers, 1964;), it was fair to say that anti-naturalistic criticism of the behavioral science paradigm did not dent the prevailing positivism in academic departments in philosophy and in the social sciences. Beginning in the 1950's, however, there was also some considerable fracturing going on within what came to be called, after Kuhn, the 'standard view' of science. This is not the place to be more than reminded of some of these pre-Kuhnian disavowals. These included abandonment of the verifiability theory of meaning (Ayer, 2nd edition, 1946), and the phenomenalist program of defining macro-objects and theoretical entities(Carnap, 1936/7, 1956, Hempel, 1958); rejection of the analytic/synthetic distinction (Quine, 1951); abandonment of the idea of an inductive logic suitable for science (Goodman, 1946, 1954), and acknowledgement of the pertinence of a realist interpretation of theory (Hempel, 1958, Nagel, 1961). Meanwhile, Chisholm (1946), Hanson (1958), Toulmin (1961), Scriven (1962), Feyerabend (1962), Hesse (1962) and others had raised serious challenges to prevailing empiricist assumptions regarding laws of nature, explanation and the 'hypothetico-deductive method.'

All this made possible Thomas S. Kuhn's The Structure of Scientific Revolutions (1962) which turned out to be the critical event in establishment thinking about science. Kuhn ignited the smouldering fire which resulted, in short order, in a devastation of empiricist foundationist epistemology. Kuhn emphasized the historical and social aspects of scientific work, and thereby provoked and encouraged both programs in the sociology of knowledge (Barnes, 1982) and themes expanded and developed in certain 'post-modern' writers, but especially the idea that scientific 'vocabularies' could no longer claim 'privilege' over others (Rorty, 1979, ch. VII). But it is also important to recognize that Kuhn did not address issues of scientific law, causality and explanation. In what he called, not wrongly, I think, 'a Copernican Revolution in the philosophy of science' Rom Harre did. Harre (1970) attacked 'the mythology of deductivism' and offered instead an interpretation of scientific practice which put at the core of theory (and explanation) a conception or model of not necessarily 'observable' natural mechanisms or structures at work. Harre, and later, Roy Bhaskar and others, fully acknowledged that knowledge was a social product. This, of course, raised difficult questions as regards the authority of science, but these 'realists' insisted that this problem could be addressed satisfactorily only in terms of a critical realism. I want to return to 'realist theory' in the context of my brief description of its relevance to the problem of agency and explanation. But before doing this, an additional development needs to be noted.

Structuralism, Post-Structuralism, Post-Modernism

It is hardly clear that 'structuralism' and a fortiori, 'post-structuralism' represent identifiable bodies of thought. First, it may be that the differences between writers usually identified in these camps are as important as what is shared. Second, themes in structuralist writers often recur in poststructuralism, for example, as part of its 'anti-humanism,' the denial of human autonomy. For our purposes, two points are of large importance: Like the empiricists who sought laws which 'govern' action, structuralists displaced agency. Notoriously, for Levi-Strauss, myths 'think themselves,' for Althusser, history is 'a process without a subject,' and for Foucault, as Kurzweil remarks: 'Foucault's archeology much reject subjectivity. Authors, works, and language are said to be objects in search of a logic independent of grammars, vocabularies, synthetic forms, and words' (1980, p. 207). Instead of empirical laws, we have here disembodied structures which do the 'governing.'

One can, of course be a structuralist who seeks empirical laws-- as in most Parsonian-influenced social science (Porpora, 1983). Parsonian theory surely dominated sociology and political science through the 1960s. It was challenged by Homans, who sought to 'bring men (sic) back in' (1964), by Garfinkel's insistence that actors were not 'cultural dopes' (1967), and by Goffman and others who sought ways to restore agency to social theory. In this regard, it is of some interest to notice several new attempts to renew the Parsonian theoretical tradition (Alexander, 1982/3; Munch, 1987). Jeffrey Alexander puts his finger quite precisely on the critical problem which needs to be overcome in Parsonian theory, viz., 'the role of individual, contingent activity' (1987, p. 168). Alexander notes that challenges to Parsons had 'legitimate grounds.' Thus,

> His is a systems-theory...Parsons assumes that there is, of course, a level of individual interaction. While he does not deny the fact of contingency, however, he assumes that there is a probability that contingent action will conform to normative patterns and the institutional balance of punishments and rewards' (p. 169).

Action is 'governed' by structure, albeit imperfectly, and explained by empirical generalizations. Similarly, as part of his attempt at renewal, Munch writes:

> Phenomena in reality, and hence also in action, can vary from total unpredictability (contingency) to total predictability (orderedness). We base predictions of events upon antecedents which we expect to have certain consequences. The number of antecedents involved can range from maximum complexity (a multiplicity with many interdependencies) to maximum simplicity (one single antecedent...(1987, p. 119).

It is clear that Munch is fully in the grip of Pareto's system-vision of the social world. Munch goes on then to apply this scheme to the explanation of action as follows:

But of course this is the quite familiar LIGA schema with all its familiar problems.

As regards post-structuralism (post-modern theory?) we can single out as criticial, 'anti-humanism,' understood as a rejection of the possibility of a philosophical anthropology and thus, of Enlightement projects of human emancipation. The criticism of 'essentialism' and, as Giddens and Bhaskar have emphasized, the idea of 'decentering the subject' was important. It undermined views, characteristic of both empiricism and phenomenology which treat 'consciousness as a datum upon with the foundations of claims to knowledge may be established' and it problematized uncritically held notions about the self and identity, a feature of key importance for feminist thinking and for rethinking race and ethnicity. Yet Giddens is correct in charging that the effort to reconstruct 'authors' through the detour, not only language, but of a particularly dubious theory of language (Pateman, 1987) dissallowed an adequate solution. Coupled with the second major feature of post-modern theory, this failure was magnified.

The second key point is the anti-scientific posture of post-modern thinking. Kuhn, without

intention, opened the floodgates of relativism. His argument that scientific consensus involved negotiation paralleled more explicitly hermeneutic approaches (e.g., as in Gadamer, 1975), and his argument (often misread) that theory-choice was not 'rational' in the sense that it had been defined by empiricists, seemed at least to put him in league with Foucault's view that by controlling what counts as knowledge, scientific practice is merely a mode of control.

The line of argument is clear enough. If there can be no 'foundation' for knowledge, then the traditional epistemological problem must be abandoned (Rorty, 1979, chapter III). This much, I think, must be allowed. But if so, the argument goes, there are no 'privileged representations,' including, therefore the claims of science (ibid., chapter IV).

Derrida's route is different but the outcome is the same. As summarized by David Hoy: 'Deconstruction shows the failure of a work's attempt at representation and, by implication, the possibility of comparable failure by any such work, or by any text whatever' (p. 44). Again, this much, I think, must be accepted, since it is a consequent of any fallibilist account of knowledge. The deeper difficulty is the assumption, evidently shared by both Rorty and Derrida, that 'there is no extra-linguistic way to determine whether the world has a stable consistent nature that language could mirror (Hoy, 1985, p. 52).

A problem has been converted to an impossibility. This is not, however, the place to look at arguments (dubious, in my view) in favor of this premise or to review arguments which reject it. (But see Bhaskar, 1975, 1991; Harre, 1986; Manicas, 1993). It is appropriate, however, to notice what happens to agency. In the absence of any sort of ground, anchor or footing for belief and action, we are instructed to 'develop action, thought, and desires by proliferation, juxtaposition, and disjunction...to prefer what is positive and multiple, difference over uniformity, flows over unities, mobile arrangements over systems. Believe that what is productive is not sedentary but nomadic' (Foucault, quoted by Harvey, 1989, p. 44). As Harvey remarks, 'postmodernism swims, even wallows, in the fragmentary and the chaotic currents of change as if that is all there is' (ibid.).

The Realist Alternative

That is not all there is. If realists are correct, there is both an independently existing nature and a relatively stable, though activity- and concept-dependent, ensemble of social structures--knowable, to be sure, only as mediated by language and history, and knowable, accordingly, only fallibly.

I began with the assertion that the idea that everything which happens is 'governed' by law to be a disaster for the possibility of a human science, and I suggested that realist theory had a genuine place for agency in a human science. I conclude with some remarks pertinent to this.

Roy Bhaskar was the first, I believe, to point out that anti-naturalisms in the history of the philosophy of the social sciences depend upon the assumption that empiricist theories of causality and existence are apt for the philosophy of the natural sciences (Bhaskar, 1978). It was thus inevitable that Kant should make room for freedom in the noumenal realm, that Dray would insist that explanation does not depend upon covering laws, that Verstehen would emerge as an alternative mode of grasping social reality, and that with the challenge to empiricist philosophy of science, there would be a general dispair of the possibility of knowledge. But we need not accept empiricist conceptions of existence and causality.

One needs first to reject 'regularity determinism,' the idea inherited from the false model of science constructed on the paradigm of classical celestial mechanics. On the realist view, the world is not determined concatenation of events, but contingent concatenation of real structures. The world is stratified and contains 'powerful particulars' which conjointly, but contingently 'determine' what is actual (Harre and Madden, 1975). Laws of nature are not, as regularity determinists hold, 'invariant relations of succession and resemblence' (to quote Comte's classic formula). They must be analysed, as Bhaskar argues, as tendencies 'which may be possessed unexercized and exercised unrealized, just as they may

...be realized unperceived (or undetected)' by persons. That is, because the world is not a Pascalean closed system, there is an in-principle unpredictability as regards everything that happens, even while, at the same time, everything that happens is caused and thus, in principle, can be explained. Put in other terms, there is both stability and a precarious about the world. There are patterns and we can establish true generalizations-- but there are also surprises. Since this as true of the events or outcomes of non-human nature (as recent complexity also insists), the covering law model of explanation cannot be adequate either as regards explanation in natural science or as regards the explanation of actions.

But once we have genuine contingency and novelty in the world, it is possible to make a place for genuine (human) agency. First of all, persons are 'powerful particulars' in that they are causes. Once mind is decentered from consciousness, we can see that as Giddens says, 'agency refers not to the intentions people have in doing things, but to their capability of doing those things in the first place (which is why agency implies power: cf. the Oxford English dictionary definition of an agent as "one who exerts power or produces an effect")' (1980, p. 9). But we can define an agency, with Giddens, as one 'who could have done otherwise.'

The idea should not be either minimized or misunderstood. It means (as I understand it) that by virtue of our emergent minded capacities, we can not be certain of what a persone will do until they actually do it! What we are, including our personalities, skills, habits, attitudes, beliefs, etc. is the product of a complex epigenesis (Manicas, 1987, pp. 295-305). And of course, along with our assessment of our contingent situation, what we do flows from this. But the in-principle unpredicability of action is a consequence, not only of the open-system character of the world, but of reflexivity and the capacity to envision alternative futures, an emergent property of minded beings.

Some writers have missed the point. For example, John Thompson remarks that 'Giddens manages to preserve the complementarity between structure and agency only by defining agency in such a way that any individual in any situation could not not be an agent' (p. 74). But this confuses freedom and agency, an error also made by Ira Cohen in his sympathetic exposition of Giddens (Cohen, 1987). Freedom regards what agents are able to do and this depends upon their 'resources.' Freedom, which presupposes agency, is distributed very unequally; agency is not. A person faced with but two disasterous alternatives is not very free; but that person remains an agent. Similarly, Cohen misleads his readers when he says:

> Giddens's contention that enablements and constraints in the exercise of agency will vary considerably in different historical circumstance...signifies an unwillingenss to establish an a priori position on questions of freedom and determinism. Considered in this light, the proviso that, in principle, agents are always capable of 'acting otherwise', represents only a denial of a thoroughgoing determinism of agency by forces to which the agent must respond automatically (p. 285).

Cohen is victim of the legacy of Kant. The issue is not to cut between the old chestnut of freedom/determinism, but to supercede it with a conception of agency which is consistent with (and demanded by) causality.

On upshot of the foregoing is the fact that we should not expect a Copernican revolution in our ability to explain the actions of persons. Indeed if our pre-scientific ('folk psychological') capacities to do this were not as good as they are, human social life would be quite impossible. On the other, it ought not be the aim of a human science to try to do better on this score. Rather, the proper aim of social science is the effort to identify the social mechanisms or structured processes being sustained by the activities of agents, and to grasp, concretely, the capacities which agents have and the constraints to which they are subject.

For example, it is frequently claimed that poverty is not a cause of crime since most poor people

are not criminals and many non-poor people are. We are then persuaded (as, e.g., by James Q. Wilson) that what is needed is a detailed longitudinal study which would begin when 'subjects were young enough and [would] involve a sufficient variety of measures, such as looking at early patterns of mother-chid bonding' (Wilson, 1992, p. A40).

The grip of Pareto (and Isaac Newton!) is obvious in this text; but even more obvvious, perhaps, is the fact that if poverty and illegal drugs and cheap firearms are structuring everyday life in urban ghettos, then for many poor young men, crime will be a 'rational' alternative, perhaps the only rational alternative.

Finally, we need also to say that, apart from the effects of the powerful particulars of non-human nature which continually are implicated in all that happens in the social world, persons are the only efficient causes of what happens in society. The 'materials' which are the medium of action for agents are, if one likes, material causes, but it is time that we rid ourselves of the structuralist idea that there are 'social forces' which act independently of us and on us. But this is not a 'voluntarism' since we cannot jump outside of our histories. We need also to reject the suggestion of some post-modern thought that the social world is 'in our heads,' or embodied in 'discourse' or in 'texts,' and that therefore 'deconstruction' will be emancipating. As Bhaskar has said, the problem of human freedom, naturalistically understood, is the problem of possessing the capacity to act in realizing one's genuine interests; and this involves understanding the sources of constraint and limitation, and then transforming these to 'needed, wanted and empowering sources of determination' (1991, p. 76).

Peter T. Manicas Liberal Studies/Department of Sociology
University of Hawai'i at Manoa