HISTORICAL EXPLANATION IN THE
SOCIAL SCIENCES*

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1 Introduction

The hope which originally inspired methodology was the hope of finding a method of enquiry which would be both necessary and sufficient to guide the scientist unerringly to truth. This hope has died a natural death. Today, methodology has the more modest task of establishing certain rules and requirements which are necessary to prohibit some wrong-headed moves but insufficient to guarantee success. These rules and requirements, which circumscribe scientific enquiries without steering them in any specific direction, are of the two main kinds, formal and material. So far as I can see, the formal rules of scientific method (which comprise both logical rules and certain realistic and fruitful stipulations) are equally applicable to all the empirical sciences. You cannot, for example, deduce a universal law from a finite number of observations whether you are a physicist, a biologist, or an anthropologist. Again, a single comprehensive explanation of a whole range of phenomena is preferable to isolated explanations of each of those phenomena, whatever your field of enquiry. I shall therefore confine myself to the more disputable (I had nearly said 'more disreputable') and metaphysically impregnated part of methodology which tries to establish the appropriate material requirements which the contents of the premisses of an explanatory theory in a particular field ought to satisfy. These requirements may be called regulative principles. Fundamental differences in the subject-matters of different sciences—differences to which formal methodological rules are impervious—ought, presumably, to be reflected in the regulative principles appropriate to each science. It is here that the student of the methods of the social sciences may be expected to have something distinctive to say.

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An example of a regulative principle is mechanism, a metaphysical theory which governed thinking in the physical sciences from the seventeenth century until it was largely superseded by a wave or field world-view. According to mechanism, the ultimate constituents of the physical world are impenetrable particles which obey simple mechanical laws. The existence of these particles cannot be explained—at any rate by science. On the other hand, every complex physical thing or event is the result of a particular configuration of particles and can be explained in terms of the laws governing their behaviour in conjunction with a description of their relative positions, masses, momenta, etc. There may be what might be described as unfinished or half-way explanations of large-scale phenomena (say, the pressure inside a gas-container) in terms of other large-scale factors (the volume and temperature of the gas); but we shall not have arrived at rock-bottom explanations of such large-scale phenomena until we have deduced their behaviour from statements about the properties and relations of particles.

This is a typically metaphysical idea (by which I intend nothing derogatory). True, it is confirmed, even massively confirmed, by the huge success of mechanical theories which conform to its requirements. On the other hand, it is untestable. No experiment could overthrow it. If certain phenomena—say, electromagnetic phenomena—seem refractory to this mechanistic sort of explanation, this refractoriness can always (and perhaps rightly) be attributed to our inability to find a successful mechanical model rather than to an error in our metaphysical intuition about the ultimate constitution of the physical world. But while mechanism is weak enough to be compatible with any observation whatever, while it is an untestable and unempirical principle, it is strong enough to be incompatible with various conceivable physical theories. It is this which makes it a regulative, non-vacuous metaphysical principle. If it were compatible with everything it would regulate nothing. Some people complain that regulative principles discourage research in certain directions, but that is a part of their purpose. You cannot encourage research in one direction without discouraging research in rival directions.

I am not an advocate of mechanism but I have mentioned it because I am an advocate of an analogous principle in social science, the principle of methodological individualism.\(^1\) According to this

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\(^1\) Both of these analogous principles go back at least to Epicurus. In recent times methodological individualism has been powerfully defended by Professor
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principle, the ultimate constituents of the social world are individual people who act more or less appropriately in the light of their dispositions and understanding of their situation. Every complex social situation, institution, or event is the result of a particular configuration of individuals, their dispositions, situations, beliefs, and physical resources and environment. There may be unfinished or half-way explanations of large-scale social phenomena (say, inflation) in terms of other large-scale phenomena (say, full employment); but we shall not have arrived at rock-bottom explanations of such large-scale phenomena until we have deduced an account of them from statements about the dispositions, beliefs, resources, and inter-relations of individuals. (The individuals may remain anonymous and only typical dispositions, etc., may be attributed to them.) And just as mechanism is contrasted with the organicist idea of physical fields, so methodological individualism is contrasted with sociological holism or organicism. On this latter view, social systems constitute 'wholes' at least in the sense that some of their large-scale behaviour is governed by macro-laws which are essentially sociological in the sense that they are sui generis and not to be explained as mere regularities or tendencies resulting from the behaviour of interacting individuals. On the contrary, the behaviour of individuals should (according to sociological holism) be explained at least partly in terms of such laws (perhaps in conjunction with an account, first of individuals' rôles within institutions and secondly of the functions of institutions within the whole social system). If methodological individualism means that human beings are supposed to be the only moving agents in history, and if sociological holism means that some superhuman agents or factors are supposed to be at work in history, then these two alternatives are exhaustive. An example of such a superhuman, sociological factor is the alleged long-term cyclical wave in economic life which is supposed to be self-propelling, uncontrollable, and inexplicable in terms of human activity, but in terms of the fluctuations of which such large-scale phenomena as wars, revolutions, and mass emigration, and such

F. A. Hayek in his Individualism and Economic Order and The Counter-Revolution of Science, and by Professor K. R. Popper in his The Open Society and its Enemies and 'The Poverty of Historicism' Economica, 1944-45, II-II. Following in their footsteps I have also attempted to defend methodological individualism in 'Ideal Types and Historical Explanation' this Journal, 1952, 3, 22, reprinted in Readings in the Philosophy of Science, ed. Feigl and Brodbeck, New York, 1953. This article has come in for a good deal of criticism, the chief items of which I shall try to rebut in what follows.

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psychological factors as scientific and technological inventiveness can, it is claimed, be explained and predicted.

I say 'and predicted' because the irreducible sociological laws postulated by holists are usually regarded by them as laws of social development, as laws governing the dynamics of a society. This makes holism well-nigh equivalent to historicism, to the idea that a society is impelled along a pre-determined route by historical laws which cannot be resisted but which can be discerned by the sociologist. The holist-historicist position has, in my view, been irretrievably damaged by Popper's attacks on it. I shall criticise this position only in so far as this will help me to elucidate and defend the individualistic alternative to it. The central assumption of the individualistic position —an assumption which is admittedly counter-factual and metaphysical—is that no social tendency exists which could not be altered if the individuals concerned both wanted to alter it and possessed the appropriate information. (They might want to alter the tendency but, through ignorance of the facts and/or failure to work out some of the implications of their action, fail to alter it, or perhaps even intensify it.) This assumption could also be expressed by saying that no social tendency is somehow imposed on human beings 'from above' (or 'from below')—social tendencies are the product (usually undesigned) of human characteristics and activities and situations, of people's ignorance and laziness as well as of their knowledge and ambition. (An example of a social tendency is the tendency of industrial units to grow larger. I do not call 'social' those tendencies which are determined by uncontrollable physical factors, such as the alleged tendency for more male babies to be born in times of disease or war.)

1 The issue of holism versus individualism in social science has recently been presented as though it were a question of the existence or non-existence of irreducibly social facts rather than of irreducibly sociological laws. (See M. Mandelbaum, 'Societal Facts', The British Journal of Sociology, 1955, 6, and E. A. Gellner, 'Explanations in History', Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volume 30, 1956.) This way of presenting the issue seems to me to empty it of most of its interest. If a new kind of beast is discovered, what we want to know is not so much whether it falls outside existing zoological categories, but how it behaves. People who insist on the existence of social facts but who do not say whether they are governed by sociological laws, are like people who claim to have discovered an unclassified kind of animal but who do not tell us whether it is tame or dangerous, whether it can be domesticated or is unmanageable. If an answer to the question of social facts could throw light on the serious and interesting question of sociological laws, then the question of social facts would also be serious and interesting. But this is not so. On the one hand, a holist may readily admit (as I pointed out in my 'Ideal
My procedure will be: first, to de-limit the sphere in which methodological individualism works in two directions; secondly, to clear methodological individualism of certain misunderstandings; thirdly, to indicate how fruitful and surprising individualistic explanations can be and how individualistic social theories can lead to sociological discoveries; and fourthly, to consider in somewhat more detail how, according to methodological individualism, we should frame explanations, first for social regularities or repeatable processes, and secondly for unique historical constellations of events.

2 Where Methodological Individualism Does not Work

There are two areas in which methodological individualism does not work.

The first is a probability situation where accidental and unpredictable irregularities in human behaviour have a fairly regular and predictable overall result.¹ Suppose I successively place 1,000 individuals facing north in the centre of a symmetrical room with two exits, one east, the other west. If about 500 leave by one exit and about 500 by the other I would not try to explain this in terms of tiny undetectable west-inclining and east-inclining differences in the individuals, for the same reason that Popper would not try to explain Types' paper, which Gellner criticises) that all observable social facts are reducible to individual facts and yet hold that the latter are invisibly governed by irreducibly sociological laws. On the other hand, an individualist may readily admit (as Gellner himself says) that some large social facts are simply too complex for a full reduction of them to be feasible, and yet hold that individualistic explanations of them are in principle possible, just as a physicist may readily admit that some physical facts (for instance, the precise blast-effects of a bomb-explosion in a built-up area) are just too complex for accurate prediction or explanation of them to be feasible and yet hold that precise explanations and predictions of them in terms of existing scientific laws are in principle possible.

This revised way of presenting the holism versus individualism issue does not only divert attention from the important question. It also tends to turn the dispute into a purely verbal issue. Thus Mandelbaum is able to prove the existence of what he calls 'societal facts' because he defines psychological facts very narrowly as 'facts concerning the thoughts and actions of specific human beings' (op. cit. p. 307). Consequently, the dispositions of anonymous individuals which play such an important role in individualistic explanations in social science are 'societal facts' merely by definition.

¹ Failure to exclude probability-situations from the ambit of methodological individualism was an important defect of my 'Ideal Types' paper. Here, Gellner's criticism (op. cit. p. 163) does hit the nail on the head.
the fact that about 500 balls will topple over to the west and about 500 to the east, if 1,000 balls are dropped from immediately above a north-south blade, in terms of tiny undetectable west-inclining and east-inclining differences in the balls. For in both cases such an ‘explanation’ would merely raise the further problem: why should these west-inclining and east-inclining differences be distributed approximately equally among the individuals and among the balls?

Those statistical regularities in social life which are inexplicable in individualistic terms for the sort of reason I have quoted here are, in a sense, inhuman, the outcome of a large number of sheer accidents. The outcome of a large number of decisions is usually much less regular and predictable because variable human factors (changes of taste, new ideas, swings from optimism to pessimism) which have little or no influence on accident-rates are influential here. Thus Stock Exchange prices fluctuate widely from year to year, whereas the number of road-accidents does not fluctuate widely. But the existence of these actuarial regularities does not, as has often been alleged, support the historicist idea that defenceless individuals like you and me are at the chance mercy of the inhuman and uncontrollable tendencies of our society. It does not support a secularised version of the Calvinist idea of an Almighty Providence who picks people at random to fill His fixed damnation-quota. For we can control these statistical regularities in so far as we can alter the conditions on which they depend. For example, we could obviously abolish road-accidents if we were prepared to prohibit motor-traffic.

The second kind of social phenomenon to which methodological individualism is inapplicable is where some kind of physical connection between people’s nervous systems short-circuits their intelligent control and causes automatic, and perhaps in some sense appropriate, bodily responses. I think that a man may more or less literally smell danger and instinctively back away from unseen ambushers; and individuality seems to be temporarily submerged beneath a collective physical rapport at jive-sessions and revivalist meetings and among panicking crowds. But I do not think that these spasmodic mob-organisms lend much support to holism or constitute a very serious exception to methodological individualism. They have a fleeting existence which ends when their members put on their mufflers and catch the bus or otherwise disperse, whereas holists have conceived of a social whole as something which endures through generations of men; and whatever holds together typical long-lived institutions, like a bank or a legal
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system or a church, it certainly is not the physical proximity of their members.

3 Misunderstandings of Methodological Individualism

I will now clear methodological individualism of two rather widespread misunderstandings.

It has been objected that in making individual dispositions and beliefs and situations the terminus of an explanation in social science, methodological individualism implies that a person’s psychological make-up is, so to speak, God-given, whereas it is in fact conditioned by, and ought to be explained in terms of, his social inheritance and environment.¹ Now methodological individualism certainly does not prohibit attempts to explain the formation of psychological characteristics; it only requires that such explanations should in turn be individualistic, explaining the formation as the result of a series of conscious or unconscious responses by an individual to his changing situation. For example, I have heard Professor Paul Sweezey, the Harvard economist, explain that he became a Marxist because his father, a Wall Street broker, sent him in the 1930’s to the London School of Economics to study under those staunch liberal economists, Professors Hayek and Robbins. This explanation is perfectly compatible with methodological individualism (though hardly compatible, I should have thought, with the Marxist idea that ideologies reflect class-positions) because it interprets his ideological development as a human response to his situation. It is, I suppose, psycho-analysts who have most systematically worked the idea of a thorough individualist and historical explanation of the formation of dispositions, unconscious fears and beliefs, and subsequent defence-mechanisms, in terms of responses to emotionally charged, and especially childhood, situations.

My point could be put by saying that methodological individualism encourages innocent explanations but forbids sinister explanations of the widespread existence of a disposition among the members of a social group. Let me illustrate this by quoting from a reply I made to Goldstein’s criticisms.

¹ Thus Gellner writes: ‘The real oddity of the reductionist [i.e. the methodological individualist’s] case is that it seems to preclude a priori the possibility of human dispositions being the dependent variable in an historical explanation—when in fact they often or always are’ (op. cit. p. 165). And Mr Leon J. Goldstein says that in making human dispositions methodologically primary I ignore their cultural conditioning. (The Journal of Philosophy, 1956, 53, 807.)
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Suppose that it is established that Huguenot traders were relatively prosperous in 17th-century France and that this is explained in terms of a widespread disposition among them (a disposition for which there is independent evidence) to plough back into their businesses a larger proportion of their profits than was customary among their Catholic competitors. Now this explanatory disposition might very well be explained in its turn—perhaps in terms of the general thriftiness which Calvinism is said to encourage, and/or in terms of the fewer alternative outlets for the cash resources of people whose religious disabilities prevented them from buying landed estates or political offices. (I cannot vouch for the historical accuracy of this example.)

I agree that methodological individualism allows the formation, or 'cultural conditioning', of a widespread disposition to be explained only in terms of other human factors and not in terms of something inhuman, such as an alleged historicist law which impels people willy-nilly along some pre-determined course. But this is just the anti-historicist point of methodological individualism.

Unfortunately, it is typically a part of the programme of Marxist and other historicist sociologies to try to account for the formation of ideologies and other psychological characteristics in strictly sociological and non-psychological terms. Marx, for instance, professed to believe that feudal ideas and bourgeois ideas are more or less literally generated by the water-mill and the steam-engine. But no description, however complete, of the productive apparatus of a society, or of any other non-psychological factors, will enable you to deduce a single psychological conclusion from it, because psychological statements logically cannot be deduced from wholly non-psychological statements. Thus whereas the mechanistic idea that explanations in physics cannot go behind the impenetrable particles is a prejudice (though a very understandable prejudice), the analogous idea that an explanation which begins by imputing some social phenomenon to human factors cannot go on to explain those factors in terms of some inhuman determinant of them is a necessary truth. That the human mind develops under various influences the methodological individualist does not, of course, deny. He only insists that such development must be explained 'innocently' as a series of responses by the individual to situations and not 'sinisterly' and illogically as a direct causal outcome of non-psychological factors, whether these are neurological factors, or impersonal sociological factors alleged to be at work in history.

Another cause of complaint against methodological individualism
is that it has been confused with a narrow species of itself (Popper calls it ‘psychologism’) and even, on occasion, with a still narrower sub-species of this (Popper calls it the ‘Conspiracy Theory of Society’).¹

Psychologism says that all large-scale social characteristics are not merely the intended or unintended result of, but a reflection of, individual characteristics.² Thus Plato said that the character and make-up of a polis is a reflection of the character and make-up of the kind of soul predominant in it. The conspiracy theory says that all large-scale social phenomena (do not merely reflect individual characteristics but) are deliberately brought about by individuals or groups of individuals.

Now there are social phenomena, like mass unemployment, which it would not have been in anyone’s interest deliberately to bring about and which do not appear to be large-scale social reflections or magnified duplicates of some individual characteristic. The practical or technological or therapeutic importance of social science largely consists in explaining, and thereby perhaps rendering politically manageable, the unintended and unfortunate consequences of the behaviour of inter-

² I am at a loss to understand how Gellner came to make the following strange assertion: ‘... Popper refers to both “psychologism” which he condemns, and “methodological individualism”, which he commends. When in the articles discussed [i.e., my “Ideal Types” paper] “methodological individualism” is worked out more fully than is the case in Popper’s book, it seems to me to be indistinguishable from “Psychologism”’. Finding no difference between methodological individualism and a caricature of methodological individualism, Gellner has no difficulty in poking fun at the whole idea: ‘Certain tribes I know have what anthropologists call a segmentary patrilineal structure, which moreover maintains itself very well over time. I could “explain” this by saying that the tribesmen have, all or most of them, dispositions whose effect is to maintain the system. But, of course, not only have they never given the matter much thought, but it also might very well be impossible to isolate anything in the characters and conduct of the individual tribesmen which explains how they come to maintain the system’ (op. cit. p. 176). Yet this example actually suggests the lines along which an individualistic explanation might be found. The very fact that the tribesmen have never given the matter much thought, the fact that they accept their inherited system uncritically, may constitute an important part of an explanation of its stability. The explanation might go on to pin-point certain rules—that is firm and widespread dispositions—about marriage, inheritance, etc., which help to regularise the tribesmen’s behaviour towards their kinsmen. How they come to share these common dispositions could also be explained individualistically in the same sort of way that I can explain why my young children are already developing a typically English attitude towards policemen.
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acting individuals. From this pragmatic point of view, psychologism and the conspiracy theory are unrewarding doctrines. Psychologism says that only a change of heart can put a stop to, for example, war (I think that this is Bertrand Russell’s view). The conspiracy theory, faced with a big bad social event, leads to a hunt for scape-goats. But methodological individualism, by imputing unwanted social phenomena to individuals’ responses to their situations, in the light of their dispositions and beliefs, suggests that we may be able to make the phenomena disappear, not by recruiting good men to fill the posts hitherto occupied by bad men, nor by trying to destroy men’s socially unfortunate dispositions while fostering their socially beneficial dispositions, but simply by altering the situations they confront. To give a current example, by confronting individuals with dearer money and reduced credit the Government may (I do not say will) succeed in halting inflation without requiring a new self-denying attitude on the part of consumers and without sending anyone to prison.

4 Factual Discoveries in Social Science

To explain the unintended but beneficial consequences of individual activities—by ‘beneficial consequences’ I mean social consequences which the individuals affected would endorse if they were called on to choose between their continuation or discontinuation—is usually a task of less practical urgency than the explanation of undesirable consequences. On the other hand, this task may be of greater theoretical interest. I say this because people who are painfully aware of the existence of unwanted social phenomena may be oblivious of the unintended but beneficial consequences of men’s actions, rather as a man may be oblivious of the good health to which the smooth functioning of his digestion, nervous system, circulation, etc., give rise. Here, an explanatory social theory may surprise and enlighten us not only with regard to the connections between causes and effect but with regard to the existence of the effect itself. By showing that a certain economic system contains positive feed-back leading to increasingly violent oscillations and crises an economist may explain a range of well-advertised phenomena which have long been the subject of strenuous political agitation. But the economists who first showed that a certain kind of economic system contains negative feed-back which tends to iron out disturbances and restore equilibrium, not only
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explained, but also revealed the existence of, phenomena which had hardly been remarked upon before.¹

I will speak of organic-like social behaviour where members of some social system (that is, a collection of people whose activities disturb and influence each other) mutually adjust themselves to the situations created by the others in a way which, without direction from above, conduces to the equilibrium or preservation or development of the system. (These are again evaluative notions, but they can also be given a 'would-be-endorsed-if' definition.) Now such far-flung organic-like behaviour, involving people widely separated in space and largely ignorant of each other, cannot be simply observed. It can only be theoretically reconstructed—by deducing the distant social consequences of the typical responses of a large number of interacting people to certain repetitive situations. This explains why individualistic-minded economists and anthropologists, who deny that societies really are organisms, have succeeded in piecing together a good deal of unsuspected organic-like social behaviour, from an examination of individual dispositions and situations, whereas sociological holists, who insist that societies really are organisms, have been noticeably unsuccessful in convincingly displaying any organic-like social behaviour—they cannot observe it and they do not try to reconstruct it individualistically.

There is a parallel between holism and psychologism which explains their common failure to make surprising discoveries. A large-scale social characteristic should be explained, according to psychologism, as the manifestation of analogous small-scale psychological tendencies in individuals, and according to holism as the manifestation of a large-scale tendency in the social whole. In both cases, the explicans does little more than duplicate the explicantum. The methodological individualist, on the other hand, will try to explain the large-

¹ This sentence, as I have since learnt from Dr A. W. Phillips, is unduly complacent, for it is very doubtful whether an economist can ever show that an economic system containing negative feed-back will be stable. For negative feed-back may produce either a tendency towards equilibrium, or increasing oscillations, according to the numerical values of the parameters of the system. But numerical values are just what economic measurements, which are usually ordinal rather than cardinal, seldom yield. The belief that a system which contains negative feed-back, but whose variables cannot be described quantitatively, is stable may be based on faith or experience, but it cannot be shown mathematically. See A. W. Phillips, 'Stabilisation Policy and the Time-Forms of Lagged Responses', The Economic Journal, 1957, 67.
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scale effect as the indirect, unexpected, complex product of individual factors none of which, singly, may bear any resemblance to it at all. To use hackneyed examples, he may show that a longing for peace led, in a certain international situation, to war, or that a government's desire to improve a bad economic situation by balancing its budget only worsened the situation. Since Mandeville's *Fable of the Bees* was published in 1714, individualistic social science, with its emphasis on unintended consequences, has largely been a sophisticated elaboration on the simple theme that, in certain situations, selfish private motives may have good social consequences and good political intentions bad social consequences.¹

Holist draws comfort from the example of biology, but I think that the parallel is really between the biologist and the methodological individualist. The biologist does not, I take it, explain the large changes which occur during, say, pregnancy, in terms of corresponding large teleological tendencies in the organism, but physically, in terms of small chemical, cellular, neurological, etc., changes, none of which bears any resemblance to their joint and seemingly planful outcome.

5 How Social Explanations Should be Framed

I will now consider how regularities in social life, such as the trade cycle, should be explained according to methodological individualism. The explanation should be in terms of individuals and their situations; and since the process to be explained is repeatable, liable to recur at various times and in various parts of the world, it follows that only very general assumptions about human dispositions can be employed in its explanation. It is no use looking to abnormal psychology for an explanation of the structure of interest-rates—everyday experience

¹ A good deal of unmerited opposition to methodological individualism seems to spring from the recognition of the undoubted fact that individuals often run into social obstacles. Thus the conclusion at which Mandelbaum arrives is 'that there are societal facts which exercise external constraints over individuals' (op. cit. p. 317). This conclusion is perfectly harmonious with the methodological individualist's insistence that plans often miscarry (and that even when they do succeed, they almost invariably have other important and unanticipated effects). The methodological individualist only insists that the social environment by which any particular individual is confronted and frustrated and sometimes manipulated and occasionally destroyed is, if we ignore its physical ingredients, made up of other people, their habits, inertia, loyalties, rivalries, and so on. What the methodological individualist denies is that an individual is ever frustrated, manipulated or destroyed or borne along by irreducible sociological or historical laws.
must contain the raw material for the dispositional (as opposed to the situational) assumptions required by such an explanation. It may require a stroke of genius to detect, isolate, and formulate precisely the dispositional premisses of an explanation of a social regularity. These premisses may state what no one had noticed before, or give a sharp articulation to what had hitherto been loosely described. But once stated they will seem obvious enough. It took years of groping by brilliant minds before a precise formulation was found for the principle of diminishing marginal utility. But once stated, the principle—that the less, relatively, a man has of one divisible commodity the more compensation he will be disposed to require for foregoing a small fixed amount of it—is a principle to which pretty well everyone will give his consent. Yet this simple and almost platitudinous principle is the magic key to the economics of distribution and exchange.

The social scientist is, here, in a position analogous to that of the Cartesian mechanist. The latter never set out to discover new and unheard-of physical principles because he believed that his own principle of action-by-contact was self-evidently ultimate. His problem was to discover the typical physical configurations, the mechanisms, which, operating according to this principle, produce the observed regularities of nature. His theories took the form of models which exhibited such regularities as the outcome of ‘self-evident’ physical principles operating in some hypothetical physical situation. Similarly, the social scientist does not make daring innovations in psychology but relies on familiar, almost ‘self-evident’ psychological material. His skill consists, first in spotting the relevant dispositions, and secondly in inventing a simple but realistic model which shows how, in a precise type of situation, those dispositions generate some typical regularity or process. (His model, by the way, will also show that in this situation certain things cannot happen. His negative predictions of the form, ‘If you’ve got this you can’t have that as well’ may be of great practical importance.) The social scientist can now explain in principle historical examples of this regular process, provided his model does in fact fit the historical situation.

This view of the explanation of social regularities incidentally clears up the old question on which so much ink has been spilt about whether the so-called ‘laws’ of economics apply universally or only to a particular ‘stage’ of economic development. The simple answer is that the economic principles displayed by economists’ models apply

1 I owe this analogy to Professor Popper
only to those situations which correspond with their models; but a single model may very well correspond with a very large number of historical situations widely separated in space and time.

In the explanation of regularities the same situational scheme or model is used to reconstruct a number of historical situations with a similar structure in a way which reveals how typical dispositions and beliefs of anonymous individuals generated, on each occasion, the same regularity. In the explanation of a unique constellation of events the individualistic method is again to reconstruct the historical situation, or connected sequence of situations, in a way which reveals how (usually both named and anonymous) individuals, with their beliefs and dispositions (which may include peculiar personal dispositions as well as typical human dispositions), generated, in this particular situation, the joint product to be explained. I emphasise dispositions, which are open and law-like, as opposed to decisions, which are occurrences, for this reason. A person's set of dispositions ought, under varying conditions, to give rise to appropriately varying decisions. The subsequent occurrence of an appropriate decision will both confirm, and be explained by, the existence of the dispositions. Suppose that a historical explanation (of, say, the growth of the early Catholic Church) largely relies on a particular decision (say, the decision of Emperor Constantine to give Pope Silvester extensive temporal rights in Italy). The explanation is, so far, rather \textit{ad hoc}: an apparently arbitrary \textit{fiat} plays a key rôle in it. But if this decision can in turn be explained as the offspring of a marriage of a set of dispositions (for instance, the Emperor's disposition to subordinate all rival power to himself) to a set of circumstances (for instance, the Emperor's recognition that Christianity could not be crushed but could be tamed if it became the official religion of the Empire), and if the existence of these dispositions and circumstances is convincingly supported by independent evidence, then the area of the arbitrarily given, of sheer brute fact in history, although it can never be made to vanish, will have been significantly reduced.

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\footnote{This should rebut Gellner's conclusion that methodological individualism would transform social scientists into 'biographers \textit{en grande série}' (op. cit. p. 176).}