

Book Reviews

Explanation and Understanding in the Human Sciences. By Gurpreet Mahajan. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992. Pp. 124. \$15.95 (cloth).

Since the Enlightenment, Western thought has emphasized the advancement of knowledge through reason and science. Early success in the natural sciences was admired and emulated in the social sciences. As recently as 1968, May Brodbeck wrote, "The possibility of a social science in principle as perfect as physics remains the unexamined premise of the vast majority of present-day scientists."¹ Indeed, during the past 2 centuries, the traditional domain of the humanities, the study of people and society, has been increasingly encroached on by scientists. With Auguste Comte's nineteenth-century formulation of *sociology* (also originally called *social physics*), a science of society was envisioned in which explanations of human phenomena would be based on scientific laws verified through empirical and logical methods. This extension of the principles and methods of the natural sciences to the study of people and society was elaborated especially in the tenets of logical positivists in the 1920s and early 1930s. However, as early as the late nineteenth century, others such as Wilhelm Dilthey proposed an approach to human science quite different from that of the natural sciences. For Dilthey, a philosopher of history and culture, the focus was on human life as experienced in its unique complexity. Central to achieving understanding is the effort of sympathy (*Verstehen*) by the knower. The older philosophy of hermeneutics was extended by Dilthey as the methodology for all of the social sciences as well as the humanities. Although others before Dilthey (e.g., Johann von Herder) as well as after Dilthey (e.g., Karl Popper) argued for a separate approach to historical studies that eschewed the notion of historical laws, Dilthey extended his view of historical method to all of the human sciences. Accordingly, while positive science set human studies on a course with close ties to the natural sciences, hermeneutics moved human sciences away from the natural sciences and into the humanities. Ernest Nagel's proposal that interpretive methods such as *Verstehen* be valued as exploratory methods for gaining insight preliminary to the use of objective methods for verification has not resolved this debate. Advocates of a human science distinct from the methods of the natural sciences view the approaches to be incommensurable. These divergences continue into contemporary philosophy of social science debates without resolution.

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It is in the historical context of these divergences that Gurpreet Mahajan critically analyzes explanation and understanding in the social sciences. Her approach is consistent with those who have historically argued for a human science with methods distinct from those of the natural sciences. Four approaches to scientific explanation and understanding in the social sciences are examined. The mode associated with logical positivism, *causal explanation*, is reviewed and found to be insufficient for the social sciences. The second approach, *reason-action explanation*, is among the oldest forms of explanation. Agreeing with common sense, it is the notion that the explanation for a human action is the reason given by the agent. *Hermeneutic understanding*, as originally formulated by Dilthey and subsequently proposed by Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur, is contrasted with causal explanation as well as reason-action explanation. Following W. B. Gallie, Arthur C. Danto, and William Dray, the narrative mode is discussed last. While there are several versions of the narrative mode, Dray has proposed that an event is explained when one can "trace the course of events by which it came about."² Mahajan presents each of these four modes as framing the object of inquiry differently and asking qualitatively different questions. After an analysis of each of these four modes, Mahajan, taking a relativistic stance, concludes, "Since there is no theoretical grid from which we can view the world in itself and write its history, we must allow points of view that offer new insights and uncover different aspects of reality some space to exist" (p. 101).

Mahajan's thesis is that logical positivism established causal explanation as the goal of all science, including the study of people and society. For Mahajan, this focus has resulted in a reductionistic science when applied to human science phenomena. Mahajan's discussion of causal explanation in the social sciences repeats frequently expressed limitations including Carl Hempel's observation that, because the social sciences are unable to specify general laws, *complete* explanations of events are not provided in social science research. Mahajan presents the now familiar and widely accepted argument that any notion of causation implying necessary and sufficient conditions for the occurrence of an event is inappropriate for the social sciences. It is easily accepted that in the social sciences even contingently necessary conditions are scarce, and, indeed, most events have multiple possible causes and can be said to be overdetermined. Especially pertinent to applied fields is Mahajan's conclusion that, because these causal conditions are subject to considerable variation in the social sciences, the notion of complete prediction is untenable. Accordingly, Mahajan believes that causal explanation is thus undermined as a guide to future action. This discussion of causal explanation in the social sciences adds little to the extensive literature already available on the subtleties of causation, a most elusive topic for both philosophers and researchers alike. Clearly, neither David Hume nor the logical positivists were enamored with the metaphysical connotations of the term. Few contemporary social scientists, whether positivist or not, would take exception to Mahajan's major point, which is that answers to causal *why* questions in the social sciences are difficult to unequivocally generate and that, typically, social scientists are interested in answering questions beyond causation including other perspectives on *why* as well as questions pertaining to *who*, *what*, and *when* of social phenomena. However, many social scientists would take exception to Mahajan's failure to stress the significance of statistical-probabilistic explanation, which adds considerably to social science understanding and prediction.

While adopting a pluralistic view, Mahajan asserts that the causal mode of explanation is especially inadequate for the social sciences because human action and meanings attributed to those actions are the subject matter. The

significance of the hermeneutic mode lies in its distinctive conception of social reality, history, and knowledge. Mahajan believes that the narrative mode should be contingently privileged so long as it is creatively informed by hermeneutic philosophy. The narrative is valued by Mahajan because it individualizes human action, it considers the actions of multiple agents, it addresses the *why* question, and it recognizes the influence of both the interpreter (researcher) as well as the contemporary context on the description provided. In addition, the narrative mode is presented as transcending the dichotomies inherent in both causal explanation (and, to some extent, in hermeneutics) pertaining to such dimensions as knower and known, subject and object, external conditions and intentionality, description and explanation, understanding and explanation, and subjective and objective analysis. Mahajan suggests that this narrative transcendence results in a *refiguration of the prefigured world*. Beyond methodological considerations, she also notes political implications of the narrative mode:

The narrative is essentially a signifier of a new type of politics and a protest against the dominant rationality of the Enlightenment. In place of a single pattern of individual, social and historical development, it stresses difference: indeed, it celebrates difference. And it is this celebration that finds an expression in its emphasis on the study of history and conception of historical events as unique particulars. . . . Presenting a narrative of particular events, groups and communities, and bringing into social discourse voices that had often been suppressed or marginalized, it has helped to empower these groups and place them in the mainstream of political life. . . . Convincing and adequate accounts of events written from the point of view of specific groups—e.g., women and peasants—can be placed beside one another, not because they supplement each other but because they reveal the complexity of our historical being and disclose the limitations of each account. . . . As we privilege the narrative contingently, we must take cognizance of these political implications and place them along with other methodological considerations. [Pp. 101–2]

Mahajan's study is a useful addition to the reference works available to those wishing to give serious consideration to these epistemological questions. She presents a strong argument for the relevance of qualitative, interpretive methods to many social science and social work questions. Although Mahajan avoids rejection of traditional quantitative-objectivistic methods that seek general causal explanations, her emphasis is clear. Mahajan prefers the term *human sciences*, yet her notion of scientific method seems narrowly restrictive in contingently privileging the narrative mode. As attractive as the methods of the humanities are for gaining insight into human affairs, it would be quite myopic to lose sight of the past and potential contributions of quantitative, controlled scientific methods to explanation and understanding in the social sciences and social work. Clearly, social work's research capacity is meager, and, despite rhetoric to the contrary, there is little danger that positivistically driven research will overcome the profession. What is possible is that a failure to nourish the meager research effort already present in the profession could result in a continued fading of the credibility of the profession. A sincere and strong valuing of efforts to engage in scholarly efforts to expand explanation and understanding of both quantitative and qualitative as well as nomothetic and ideographic types of research is critically important. A pluralistic stance is necessary; explanation and understanding of important social science and social work concerns may be advanced through a variety of routes. Regrettably, Mahajan's work does not provide that balance. Nevertheless, Mahajan's essay is a compact review of alternate models developed in literary and historical disciplines.

It has often been said that philosophers of science and researchers proceed independently, with different interests and different methods. Philosophers, on the one hand, are said to reconstruct idealizations of how science should be conceptualized, with periodic reference to observations of the actual conduct of science. Scientists, on the other hand, are thought to be driven less by philosophical abstractions as to how they should do their research than by practical interest in answering research questions. Because scientific activity is dynamic and rapidly changing, it is assumed that philosophers of science necessarily must attend to contemporary scientific work to avoid complete irrelevance. However, these characterizations of the separate worlds of philosophers and researchers appear to be breaking down, at least for social scientists. The research literature is now replete with philosophical discussions, written not by philosophers but by working researchers. This is because the philosophical issues are being framed in such a way as to create alternatives for the selection of research questions and research methods. Accordingly, it is now unlikely that researchers will be able to proceed unencumbered by these philosophical considerations even as they continue to pursue answers to pragmatic questions. Clearly, as new generations of researchers are educated, the interface of philosophy of science and research methods cannot be and should not be ignored. Researchers would do well to keep an eye toward developments in the philosophy of science such as those presented in Mahajan's essay. And although many philosophers and scientists would agree with Mahajan's argument for different scientific models for the natural and the social sciences, it is likely that, as in the past, developments in the natural sciences will continue to contribute to the shaping of social science research. Concurrently, literary analysis and interpretive methods nurtured in the humanities will surely enrich attempts to illuminate the meaning of human action. Their potential for contribution to descriptive science is significant. When it comes to expanding and enriching explanation and understanding of human actions, there is much to be learned from perspectives and methods developed in the humanities and the natural sciences, as well as those more traditionally associated with the social sciences. For social work, a profession concerned with improving the human condition, understanding the past through historical methods is useful only to the extent general explanations of human events can provide understanding that will guide future action. Neither reason-action nor hermeneutic modes address questions that can provide such understanding. Clearly, questions addressed in the causal explanation mode are pertinent to social work concerns, and the profession's research knowledge base has benefited considerably from answers to causal questions. It is likely that causal explanations will continue to serve the profession well. As valuable as the hermeneutic and narrative modes are for gaining insight into the meaning of many social phenomena, especially in the study of historical events, they cannot establish causal explanations. Without causal explanation, the social sciences and social work would offer little to a society searching to prevent and ameliorate social problems and little to the improvement of the human condition.

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Notes

1. M. Brodbeck, ed., *Readings in the Philosophy of the Social Sciences* (New York: Macmillan, 1968), p. 1.
2. W. H. Dray, *Laws and Explanations in History* (London: Oxford University Press, 1957), p. 68.