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Beyond Understanding: The Career of the Concept of Understanding in the Human Sciences

Paul A. Roth

Only [that which] spirit has created does it understand.

Vico ([1725] 1984)

A fundamental intuition underpins efforts to distinguish the human and the natural sciences: humans create and sustain the social but not the natural order. Comprehending what structures the social thus involves factors – human values and purposes – that do not belong to the natural order. Understanding situates the social (in all its forms) within a matrix of human concerns and purposes assumed to sustain it.

Understanders understand by apprehending what others do or value and why they do or value what they do. Explanation situates whatever wants explaining within the general causal structure of the world; explainers explain by identifying the general causal processes at work in particular cases. Explainers pose the study of humans *qua* social beings as continuous with the study of humans *qua* natural objects. Understanders conceive of the human sciences as *sui generis*, a realm of study of nonnatural objects constituted by values and interests. An ability to parse experience in terms of categories we create presumably divides us from the remainder of the natural world.

Yet despite many decades of debate, it remains unclear whether demands for “understanding” pose a genuinely contrasting or even an ultimately coherent alternative to whatever “explanation” requires. The issue need not concern the supposed “reduction” of one order of things to another. The more fundamental question is whether or not anything essentially differentiates the processes needed to account for human behaviors from those needed for other processes in nature.

Answering this question requires exploring how notions of understanding and an interrelated family of terms – “interpretation,” “meaning,” and “translation” – figure into philosophical debates. Does an examination of these terms and their uses suggest an epistemological license for a principled distinction between understanding and explanation?¹

For the notions of understanding, meaning, and so forth to play the unique roles for which they typically are cast requires showing how they might work to systematically set the social apart from the general causal order. Making social factors part of a world humans share marks them as real; their role in structuring behaviors gives them claim to systematicity, and so objects of a science. Sustaining a principled explanation/understanding divide requires, in short, some story of how, for example, interests and values create orderings not ascertainable by methods for studying how the natural order orders.

Yet talk of nonnatural factors appears as wanton reification, a mere *façon de parler*, unless these claims to sharing and systematicity prove *necessary* to our ways of organizing and comprehending the social world. The assumption that understanding and its conceptual kin are nonnatural implies there can be a “fact of the matter” to meaning – a realism with regard to meaning. Such “objects of understanding” require a special science; that is, in order to make systematic sense of the observed we are required to add these nonnatural elements to our ontological inventory. Yet cutting the world up into two ontologically incommensurable chunks – nonnatural and natural, meaningful and nonmeaningful – calls for compelling justification.²

The first section surveys some of the underlying issues historically implicated in distinguishing between explanation and understanding. It builds the case for a distinct science of understanding by examining why nonnatural meaning escapes all accounting from within the natural realm and yet can be scientifically studied. The next section turns to an examination of an important debate invoking a historicist form of “meaning realism,” and asks what empirical significance attaches to “real meaning.” Does it abet the study of peoples who are not “culturally near”? The final section focuses on a dispute in Holocaust historiography between Christopher Browning and Daniel Jonah Goldhagen which may, at first blush, appear to pose a different challenge for understanding than that arising from the examination of exotic others. However, I maintain that, for such cases too, appeals to a special science of understanding add nothing. I conclude by suggesting reasons why a distinction between explanation and understanding is not one we need draw.

Real Understanding

My concern in this section and the next will be with a basic historicist rationale for an object of understanding – for a shared something for understanding to be

about, a something that eludes explanation. Friends of understanding need to say how the significance of the social escapes being accounted within the order of nature. Otherwise, there will be no principle by which to distinguish between explanation and understanding.

Sentient beings, the thought goes, are essentially unlike atoms in the void by virtue of having a perspective on the world. Possession of a perspective impacts behavior by allowing humans to formulate their own order of things. Such structures of understanding "overlie" the natural order and are distinct from it. Dilthey's dictum, "Nature we explain; psychic life we understand [*verstehen*]"³ expresses an insisted-upon contrast between the invariant order of nature and the contingencies of human comprehension of the historical moment.

But to matter, there must be something shared, something that understanding is jointly an understanding of. For without a *shared* something, understanding offers no route to an account of the social. Yet the relation of people to their shared perspective must not be just that of actors to a shared script. For that type of sharing obviates any special place for understanding by depicting people as just "judgmental dopes" (in Harold Garfinkel's memorable phrase). A social script then goes proxy for laws of nature. Any need for a deep divide between explanation and understanding disappears.

In order to support a principled distinction between explanation and understanding then, whatever is shared in understanding must be "doubly contingent."⁴ The first contingency is of time and place. Were circumstances different, the shared stuff would be other than it is. The task of understanding here is to recover the shared something of the cultural matrix.

The second contingency concerns variability in how "insiders" interpret social rules, and so forth. The task of understanding here is to provide an account that makes people into something more than social automatons. That is, to support a special role for understanding, the shared stuff must not only be historically contingent, but it also must allow of application not rigidly determined by circumstance. This second form of contingency requires variability *within* (and not just between) social orders. Unlike mindless nature, individuals *judge* what matters, and how it matters. This variability sets the social worlds that sentient beings create and inhabit somehow apart from the invariant laws patterning nature. Understanding consists, then, of a mental framework stable enough to be shared but dynamic enough to allow for individual improvisation.

The natural sciences cannot incorporate the world of social experience, the argument runs, because value-orientation defines that world. It is one dominated by actions influenced by and "directed toward" objects that are not things in the world – for example, religious beliefs, personal relationships, loyalties to groups and institutions. Weber speaks for the tradition here by identifying value-orientation as what "seals off" accounts of human action from explanatory approaches used by the natural sciences.

The concept of culture is a *value-concept*. Empirical reality becomes "culture" to us because and insofar as we relate it to value ideas. . . . We cannot discover, however, what is meaningful to us by means of a "presuppositionless" investigation of empirical data. Rather perception of its meaningfulness to us is the presupposition of its becoming an *object* of investigation. (Weber [1904] 1949:76-7)

Weber decisively influences subsequent debate in at least two respects. The first is the Humean point that an inventory of the furniture of the universe does not contain value statements. The second is that "'culture' is that segment of nature on which *human beings* confer meaning and significance." "Cultural reality" is "knowledge from particular points of view" (Weber [1904] 1949:81).⁵ Social reality only "shows up" from within a historically received and contingently constituted perspective.

Cultural meaning exemplifies how the mind structures experience and concomitantly frames the task of understanding. Gadamer nicely situates the issues in the following way. Just as the lawlike structure found in the natural sciences constitutes the explanatory frame imposed on experience of the physical world, so too do the values and suppositions unique to each society and age form the framework within which to comprehend the experiences of beings like us (Gadamer 1979:116). The sciences of nature explain (causally account for) the particular events by fitting them in with the general way the world works. In contrast, the human sciences want to understand how historically specific cultural things fit into historically specific lives. Where answers to the former require patterns of universal necessity, the latter call for patterns of temporal contingency.

But this privileging of understanding as an organon by which to comprehend the inner life of humans introduces in its wake problems of truth and objectivity peculiar to that inner realm. If there is to be a science to be had, there must be accepted evidence against which claims can be checked, and a reliable method of testing as well. For there to be a plausible parallel to the natural world, there must be an object of understanding as truth-maker and a method of understanding as its test.

Dilthey exercises a fateful influence here. Understanding, Dilthey held, cannot be mind-reading, for we have no direct access to other minds. Better to model understanding on analogy with a text that is mutually comprehensible – readable by all. The processes of translating, interpreting, and finally understanding a text – how issues of meaning are settled within a community – becomes the paradigm for the study of understanding.

If, as Gadamer remarks, "Understanding is a participation in the common aim" (1979:147), what could be better evidence that one achieves that participation than "knowing how to go on" in "interpreting" a social text? By assimilating the notion of a science of understanding to the text metaphor, and so analogizing the processes of reading and meaning, one obtains the desired parallel with explanation. For this identifies understanding with known methods and discernible outcomes. Taking cultural artifacts as reifications of meaning, success in dealing with

such texts constitutes evidence for attributing truth to translations and interpretations, just as ongoing success in experimental encounters with nature seemingly licenses claims to representational truth.⁶

Three assumptions emerge here. First, cultural artifacts are evidence of meaning, of inner life reified. Second, meaning so represented may be translated, literally taken from the idiom of their creators and put into an idiom accessible to us. Third, translation – mapping of one idiom into another – may be appropriately interpreted, that is, put into a context that determines its meaning for us and others.⁷

Together, these assumptions – artifacts are evidence of meaning, meaning translates, and translation allows of rational disambiguation via further contextualization (interpretation) – mutually support the intuition that the senses provide evidence for something apart from the order of nature – meaning. The assumptions define as well what makes for objectivity in investigations of the social experience of others – successful translation or interpretation. The reading–meaning link implies the systematicity, intersubjectivity, and yet also the individuality (of interpretation) that understanding requires. Nonnatural states – how things stand in the minds of those studied – account for objects in the world – texts and other cultural artifacts. As in the natural sciences, the science of understanding infers from the seen to the unseen.

The concepts of understanding and meaning are thus linked insofar as a shared meaning is what humans add to experience seen “from within” a particular cultural perspective. Understanding constitutes a participation in or sharing of that perspective.⁸

The Experience Distant – Understanding Hawaiian-style

Does, in fact, a historicist perspective suffice to legitimate a robust notion of understanding? Do the assumptions identified in the previous section work as advertised, as a rationale for a nonnatural realm of meaning and a special science of understanding? Historicism as here imagined seeks to reconstruct the shared mental stuff answering to the “what is it like to be” for historically specific groups. To do the work intended, nonnatural meaning must be *necessary* to “participating” in the views of others. If nonnatural meaning does not constitute what one must apprehend in order to participate socially, then it has lost its *raison d'être*, at least for purposes of underwriting a special science of understanding. Without the assumption of a shared something linking those studied, there is no special mentality to reconstruct, nothing for historicism to be about.

In order to bring out lurking difficulties in the “shared stuff” assumption, I turn to a recent exemplification of an ongoing controversy centering on issues concerning how to “discover” by which standards people think, and so how to interpret their actions. This is the dispute between anthropologists Gananath

Obeyesekere and Marshall Sahlins.⁹ Their interpretive disagreement concerns the eighteenth-century Hawaiians' response to Captain James Cook's landing in Hawaii and his subsequent death at the hands of the Hawaiians.

Indeed, what makes the death of Cook appear to be of singular significance is just that it manifests a point of access to the "inner workings" of the indigenous conceptual scheme. Ironically, both Obeyesekere and Sahlins claim to speak from "inside" a native perspective. Yet Obeyesekere insists on attributing to the "natives" a distinctly universal form of game-theoretic generic wisdom. Sahlins defends a strongly enculturated notion, one unique to that time and place.¹⁰

The facts not in dispute are that Captain James Cook landed on a beach on the island of Hawaii during the Makahiki festival sometime late in 1778 or early 1779. After a brief stay, he departed. Damage to one of his ships forced his unanticipated and unplanned return to the island shortly thereafter. His return occasioned serious dissension between the local chiefs and Cook. Cook soon became involved in a confrontation with the Hawaiians in the course of which they stabbed and clubbed him to death, carried away his body, and (apparently) dismembered it.

Why did this happen? Sahlins maintains that the manner and circumstance of Cook's arrival during the Makahiki festival established for Hawaiians that Cook was the god Lono.¹¹ What did not sit well, Sahlins suggests, was Cook's return. Having unwittingly established himself as Lono, his return to the islands did not fit into the cultural category into which he had been placed. Upon his return, Sahlins remarks, "Cook was now *hors catégorie*" (1981:22). The "explanation" of Cook's death, on this account, locates it as a consequence of Cook's "violation" of the part for which he was scripted. For the Makahiki is about, *inter alia*, challenge and renewal of basic political forms of Hawaiian cultural life. "The killing of Captain Cook was not premeditated by the Hawaiians. But neither was it an accident, structurally speaking. It was the Makahiki in an historical form" (Sahlins 1981:24). Having been granted the status of a god, Cook suffered the ritual fate.¹²

For Sahlins, the circumstances surrounding Cook's death constitute a case of "cultural improvisation" (1981:67). Sahlins terms such improvisations a "structure of the conjuncture," an effort to assimilate a dissonant experience (the unexpected return to Hawaii by Cook) given the available conceptual resources. Cook's initial conformity with, and then transgression of, Hawaiian categories provide, on Sahlins' view, a natural experiment in how categories re-form when experience diverges from what people anticipate.¹³ Sahlins poses the question as one asked within a determinate conceptual framework, albeit a framework peculiar to people, time, and place. In this regard, the conception of rationality is "local."

Obeyesekere maintains at least two theses in opposing Sahlins. The first – Obeyesekere's negative or critical thesis – charges that Sahlins has written his own preconceptions and prejudices into the psyche of the Hawaiians. In particular,

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here is yet another case of a Western anthropologist assuming that dark-skinned people are too witless to see the British as mere mortals like themselves. Sahlins postures the Hawaiians as so in the grips of their cultural lore as to be unable to distinguish between a light-skinned foreigner and a mythical god.

Logically independent of Obeyesekere's critique of Sahlins is a second thesis. This develops an interpretive account of the Hawaiians as endowed with "practical rationality." "In the West rational systematization of thought was articulated to a 'pragmatic rationality' where goals are achieved through technically efficient means, culminating in modern capitalism. . . . I take the position that 'practical rationality,' if not the systematization of conceptual thought, must exist in most, if not all, societies, admittedly in varying degrees of importance" (Obeyesekere [1992] 1997:263 n.48). But Obeyesekere expands the notion beyond utilitarian consideration so as to include "reflective decision making by a calculation or weight of the issues involved in any problematic situation" ([1992] 1997:20).¹⁴ "Reflective" decisions "see past" culturally freighted coincidences (Cook's arriving during the Makahiki) to the actual state of affairs (Cook as a British "chief") ([1992] 1997:91).¹⁵

More importantly, this expansion of the concept implies that cultural actors can decide whether or not to apply their "normal" modes of understanding to particular situations. So, for example, Hawaiians presumably could choose to understand Cook's arrival on the shores of Hawaii either as the arrival of Lono, or as a coincidental happening. Indeed, their choice would be made in light of how it best advantaged them to accommodate the events in question.¹⁶ Against the Sahlinsian "tyranny of culture," Obeyesekere invokes universal bases of rationality rooted in "the physical and neurological bases of cognition and perception" ([1992] 1997:60, see also 20–2).

Yet neither Obeyesekere nor Sahlins ever pause to disentangle the issues of defending their particular interpretation of events from the general methodological question of what marks "genuine" understanding. The dispute would have particular point if one grants the assumption each makes of a necessarily shared cultural truth by the Hawaiians. But no argument animates this assumption; it is idle except for purposes of fueling polemics. That is, although both Obeyesekere and Sahlins accuse one another of reading Western ways into Hawaiian mores, neither appears to doubt that a nonnatural meaning "stands behind" the texts they interpret. Each claims to specify what the Hawaiians share in the process of providing an understanding of the rationale for killing Cook. But neither ever begins to make the case that some such sharing constitutes a necessary condition for Hawaiian (or any other) culture.¹⁷

The debate proves "philosophical" insofar as it centers on issues impervious to empirical test, for example, which standards (Sahlins'? Obeyesekere's? some other?) are in use? For each, substantive assumptions about the basic nature of human cognition must first be made, and these assumptions drive subsequent interpretations of the evidence. The different assumptions result in logically

incompatible but empirically equivalent judgments regarding what or how natives think. It is not just that claims to understanding are underdetermined by the available evidence. The very claim that there is a special, determinate understanding remains unjustified, indeed without any supporting argument.

Steven Lukes, a principal in earlier debates regarding Peter Winch's reading of Evans-Pritchard on the Azande, provides an interesting perspective on the Sahlins-Obeyesekere exchange.¹⁸ Lukes too sees the issues as continuous. Is rationality a local matter (as Sahlins maintains) or a transcultural norm (as Obeyesekere insists)?

Lukes, not unreasonably, offers to split the difference: others (or Others) must "minimally" share some sense of truth and reality with us and, as well, have reasons that are contextually determined (Lukes 2000:13). But, as already argued, this suggests no more than the convenience of presuming or postulating a "sharing" for purposes of "getting started" with translation – sharing as a necessary presumption for translation. As such, it fails to inform as to what, if anything, is or must actually be shared. Perhaps commonalities are just blindly imposed in order to "get on" with communication. *There is no distinguishing here between imputing our standards to others and "discovering" that, after all, they share that standard.* Either philosophical assumption – we've made them into us, or we've discovered that they are, in essentials, like us – accommodates the possible outcomes. No *evidence* could *possibly* decide between competing views about "how natives think" in this regard. Rather, what this debates reminds us is that assumptions to the effect that there exists just one "meaning in mind" function as unargued legitimation for what gets done in any case.¹⁹

Recall, in this regard, the three pillars of meaning realism identified in the previous section: social artifacts (including language) are evidence of meaning, meanings translate, and translations allow of further disambiguation through interpretation. Using these assumptions, historicist perspectivalism underwrites a notion of "real meaning" and a corresponding science of understanding. But note how debate about translation and interpretation undoes in practice this reified view of meaning. For actual debates reveal that translations and interpretations do *not* yield unique results. If the available evidence yields disparate results to interpreters, why not to the natives as well? *So claims that some one meaning, some fixed frame of mind, must stand behind meaning production itself require additional justification.*

"Meaning" may be, as the text metaphor implies, a process that communities investigate, but *nothing* so far mandates that there must be more to meaning beyond social mechanisms for the maintenance of apparent consensus. No argument yet shows that rational translators, working unceasingly on a text, must or will converge on a particular interpretation. Indeed, experience reveals just the opposite result in this regard. *Meaning is "read into" social artifacts on the yet to be justified assumption that a shared meaning must be a condition of their being "available" to others.* Yet nothing so far establishes that the social consumption of texts requires a prior shared meaning.

The Experience Near – Understanding Holocaust Perpetrators

Reconstructing a historically or culturally distant framework of understanding does not benefit by the postulate of an “object of understanding.” Meaning can be “stabilized” in different and conflicting ways. Alternatively, emphasis may be placed on rationalizing behavior that is historically or culturally near. This highlights instead the second aspect of the double contingency of interpretation – variation of application of norms within a community. When the problems are set by concerns accounting for why apparently cultural kin behave in a certain way, do appeals to understanding help advance the search for answers? I turn to some recent debates in Holocaust historiography which turn on this issue of finding the determinants of extraordinary mass behavior.

Regarding late eighteenth-century Hawaiians prior to real contact with Europeans, the question concerns just how different could their perception of another human being be from ours? Regarding Germans in the third and fourth decades of the twentieth century with a long history of contact with fellow citizens of Jewish descent, the question too concerns just how different could their perception of another human being be from ours? In the first case, cultural distance animates the question; in the second case, cultural proximity generates the puzzle. How does each group reason from and about experience; what is it like to be one of them?²⁰

What motivated Germans of the Nazi era to tolerate and participate in mass killings of Jews and others?²¹ Such choices ultimately engender what Raul Hilberg (1985) aptly terms “the destruction of the European Jews” – the Holocaust.²² Broadly speaking, competing lines of interpretation stress either structural-functional elements – the nature of totalitarian states, the dynamics of modernity, the banality of evil – or motivational/intentional factors – the anti-Semitism of Hitler and his functionaries, or the general climate of anti-Semitism in Germany. Neither alone seems sufficient. The former cannot explain the complicity, indeed enthusiasm, with which the extermination process was embraced. But the intentionalist thesis cannot explain the timing and answer the question of why the Holocaust took place in Germany (and not, for example, France or Russia).²³

Why not simply combine the two? Because they are (or appear to be) logically incompatible. One explains by specifying a motivation to kill, the other explains why killing occurs in the absence of any clear or fixed plan specifying this outcome. For example, deportation to Madagascar would be a possible functionalist outcome to demands for a “final solution”; for intentionalists, the “final solution” entails genocide by whatever means possible. In this regard, the functionalist thesis does not supplement intentionalism, but replaces it.²⁴ Intentionalism and functionalism, in short, cannot cohabit the same explanatory framework because they ask substantially different explanatory questions.²⁵

A particularly clear example of this debate is the dispute regarding “perpetrator history.” The principals here are Daniel Jonah Goldhagen (1997, esp. chs. 6–9)

and Christopher Browning (1992a). The disagreement concerns how to explain the actions of Nazi death squads in Poland and other Nazi-occupied territories.²⁶ Upon examination, interpretive disagreement only reflects an even more fundamental underlying division on just what needs explaining.

Browning writes as a “modified functionalist” (1992b), Goldhagen as a strong (and broad) intentionalist. Both use basically the same archival evidence to account for the actions of Reserve Police Battalion 101. Both Browning and Goldhagen attempt to answer what I term the “choice problem”: why did so many people with no prior history of brutalization or murder participate, at one level or another, in the killing operations? If the theological problem of evil is why a supposedly beneficent deity permits human suffering, the historians’ problem of evil is set by the choice problem. As A. D. Moses remarks, “Here we are dealing with very basic, precritical orientations to the problem of evil, which historians bring to bear on the problems they study” (Moses 1998:199–200). Here one seeks a why.

For Goldhagen, the form and evolution of the manner of killing – shootings, gassings, death marches – is incidental to explaining why *Jews* were killed. On Goldhagen’s account, all Germans wanted to kill all Jews. The killings took place as circumstances allowed. Bureaucratic structure forms no part of his explanation regarding why the Holocaust happened.

Browning, in contrast, sees the Holocaust as an evolutionary process, one in which lower level officials “felt their way” in response to various problems and pressures, including ambiguous directives, shortages of men and materiel, and “inefficiencies” involved in the task of killing. For Browning, expediency explains, to the extent anything does, the transitions from deportation to the East to shootings to factory-style killing. What emerges retrospectively as “the Holocaust” is real enough, but it represents, for Browning, no single or single-minded intention. Nonintentional factors generate and sustain the deadly dynamics.

Browning brought “perpetrator history” to scholarly center-stage with his 1992 work. He provides a microhistory, an examination of a single (but, as the figures show, typical) battalion of reservists (that is, Germans too old or too unfit for frontline duty) acting as military police in occupied Poland. These “ordinary men” became the instruments of mass executions, shooting to death an estimated 1.3 million civilians, including women, children, and the elderly. The estimated number of people involved in the killing operations is about 300,000. In addition, it is now widely recognized that the general populace knew the fate befalling Jews.

In the context of perpetrator history generally, and the case of Reserve Police Battalion 101 in particular, the apparent absence of exculpatory factors generates the need for explanation. For example, as both Browning and Goldhagen agree, people were not prosecuted for refusing to kill Jews. Soldiers assigned to execution squads could opt out of participation without apparent retaliation, and some did. Most, however, did not. In addition, for the reservists studied by Browning and Goldhagen, anti-Semitism was *not* an expressed motive. When interviewed by

prosecutors in the postwar era, none of the surviving members of the battalion cited hatred of Jews as a reason for their participation.

Further, the reservist battalion, unlike the notorious *SS Einsatzgruppen*, were not self-selected or screened prior to their assignment. To the contrary, the reservists in Battalion 101 came, as Browning notes, from areas of Germany known for low-levels of anti-Semitism and without prior histories of political or criminal involvement. Likewise, since these were reservists, their actions cannot be explained by the psychological effects of brutalization due to service in combat. These men saw no combat. Finally, the operations were carried out without any apparent concern for secrecy. Photos abound. Spouses were present, if not at the site of actions, then in the area. Letters to home communicate what was happening.²⁷ As scholars focus more on "perpetrator history," solving the choice problem becomes the test for a successful analysis.²⁸

Just how "ordinary" are Browning's Germans? Browning, invoking important research in the postwar years by Stanley Milgram and later Philip Zimbardo, concludes (albeit regretfully) that "I must recognize that in such a situation I could have been either a killer or an evader – both were human – if I want to understand and explain the behavior of both as best I can" (Browning 1992c:36). "If the men of Reserve Police Battalion 101 could become killers under such circumstances, what group of men cannot?" (Browning 1992a:189).²⁹ Whether we are killers or not, in short, is a matter of moral luck.

In his review of Browning's book (published several years prior to his own, and clearly very much on his mind as he wrote), Goldhagen put the difference between his view and Browning's as follows. "The men of Reserve Police Battalion 101 were not ordinary 'men,' but ordinary members of an extraordinary political culture, the culture of Nazi Germany, which was possessed of a hallucinatory, lethal view of the Jews. That view was the mainspring of what was, in essence, voluntary barbarism" (Goldhagen 1992:52). Browning (1996:88–9) concurs with this diagnosis of the difference.

The operant term here is "voluntary." It marks for Goldhagen what separates his account from all others. For Goldhagen charges that a situational or functionalist account of the choice problem provides no answer at all.³⁰ Given the absence of other possible exculpatory factors noted above, Browning seeks to locate motivating factors, either within the immediate or near situation (peer pressure, role assignment, etc.) or in the background, as just pervasive and enduring parts of the culture in which the reservists operated. The results are not merely predictable but, as Browning states, ones to which any person could or would fall prey. But, Goldhagen protests, Browning's account makes Germans into judgmental dopes of an extraordinary sort. "One does not have to be a Kantian philosopher to recognize and then to say that the wholesale slaughter of unarmed, unresisting men, women, and children is wrong" (Goldhagen 1992:51).³¹ Functionalist accounts fail, I take Goldhagen's suggestion to be, because he finds the motivation they ascribe far too weak to rationalize what was done to the Jews.

Goldhagen has been roundly excoriated on almost every aspect of his view, from his advocacy of a monocausal explanation of the Holocaust – the anti-Semites did it, and they were all anti-Semites – to his claims to originality.³² What has not been appreciated by his critics, however, has been his novel and important complications of the choice problem, and how these complications lend some measure of credibility to his insistence on a monocausal explanation.

Goldhagen puts his critical challenge to functionalism in a chilling way: “Surely the obvious relish of these men [the reservists], the tone that it suggests existed for many in the battalion, casts doubt on the sense of reluctance and disapproval that pervades Browning’s book” (Goldhagen 1992:51). Call this the “smile problem.” The problem is just this: what, on the functionalist account, explains the exhibited pleasure and enthusiasm with which Jews were persecuted and killed? Peer pressure or situational factors seem explanatory of compliance, not enthusiasm. The pervasive, bloody, and personal forms of killing that precede the death camps seems unexplained by appeal to the “banality of evil.”

Browning, to his credit, recognizes and acknowledges this important anomaly for the functionalist and “situationalist” account he otherwise endorses. Describing a series of “Jew hunts” – sweeps of areas supposedly already cleared of the Jewish population – Browning puzzles over how the reservists went “above and beyond” what was required for their grisly tasks. “But the ‘Jew hunt’ was not a brief episode. It was a tenacious, remorseless, ongoing campaign in which the ‘hunters’ tracked down and killed their ‘prey’ in direct and personal confrontation. It was not a passing phase but an existential condition of constant readiness and intention to kill every last Jew who could be found” (Browning 1992a:32). Called upon to account for sustained displays of enthusiasm and initiative, the functionalist has nothing to offer.

Indeed, what Goldhagen most strenuously and consistently maintains wants explaining is the particular viciousness and enthusiasm that the persecution and murder of Jews displays – the “smile problem.”³³ “Because the killers . . . did not have to kill, any explanation which is incompatible with the killers’ possibility of choice must, in light of this evidence, be ruled out. Germans could say ‘no’ to mass murder. They chose to say ‘yes’” (1997:381, see also 487n.4). No one else has an explanation of the “smile problem”; Goldhagen does.

A. D. Moses’ “Structure and agency in the Holocaust” (1998)³⁴ offers an appreciation of the role of the “smile problem” in lending significance to Goldhagen’s claims. But Moses sees the explanatory conflict in terms of commitment to structures – general factors, of the sort Browning favors – and cultural particulars – the specifics of German history and culture that allowed the widespread participation needed to make the Holocaust possible *for Germans*. These, Moses maintains, are basic *metahistorical* “narrative strategies”; it is the basic form, Moses suggests, of historical underdetermination. Historians, that is, can always match the facts to one or the other of these explanatory lines. “The current debate is so polarized because Goldhagen and his critics are arguing about these contending narratives as much as they are disputing ‘the facts’”

(Moses 1998:199). In consequence, "the questions he [Goldhagen] has posed for the study of the Holocaust are not the sort that can be dispensed with by reference to some protocol of facticity or professional orthodoxy" (Moses 1998:197). The only way to arbitrate such disputes, according to Moses, is to go to a "deeper level."

Unfortunately, the "deeper level" to which Moses recurs relies on Goldhagen's self-description of his key thesis, that is, that his account alone identifies and details the pervasive motivational factors driving the behavior of perpetrators.

I acknowledge the humanity of the actors in a specific manner that others do not. . . . I recognize that the perpetrators were not automatons or puppets but individuals who had beliefs and values . . . which informed the choices that these individuals . . . made. My analysis is predicated upon the recognition that each individual made choices about how to treat Jews. It therefore restores the notion of individual responsibility. (Goldhagen 1996:38)³⁵

His account of the motivational factors shows why German brutality regularly greatly exceeded what circumstances appear to require in their treatment of Jews. Only by understanding the special character of German anti-Semitism, his claim goes, do the important differences emerge between "ordinary" Germans and "ordinary" men.

Goldhagen makes a solution to the smile problem his litmus test for adequacy of explanation, secure in his knowledge that the smile problem is a singularly glaring and recognized anomaly for the functionalist account. "[M]y critics say that my explanation is wrong without providing any coherent alternative. . . . What critics do not say is that, far from being dismissive of them I demonstrate that the conventional explanations cannot account for the actions of the perpetrators and other central features of the Holocaust to which they pertain" (Goldhagen 1996:39). As far as he goes, Goldhagen is correct.

But the irony here is that Goldhagen's account fails completely to distinguish itself from those he opposes. For Goldhagen's Germans turn out to be as puppet-like, and as psychologically implausible, as the players imagined in the functionalist scenarios. For if the Germans as functionalists imagine them appear incomprehensibly morally numb, Goldhagen's willing executioners are as much social automatons as Browning's ordinary men, and for basically the same reason – neither can reasonably be expected to break the grip of the conditions in which they find themselves.

German anti-Semitism on Goldhagen's account constitutes a type of psychological reagent, an irresistible, coercive belief–desire combination.

Explaining why the Holocaust occurred requires a radical revision of what has until now been written. This book is that revision.

This revision calls for us to acknowledge what has for so long been generally denied or obscured by academic and non-academic interpreters alike: Germans' antisemitic beliefs about Jews were the *central causal agent* of the Holocaust. They

were the central causal agent not only of Hitler's decision to annihilate European Jewry . . . but also of the perpetrators' willingness to kill and to brutalize Jews. The conclusion of this book is that antisemitism *moved* many thousands of "ordinary" Germans – and would have moved millions more, had they been appropriately positioned – to slaughter Jews. Not economic hardship, not the coercive means of a totalitarian state, not social psychological pressure, not invariable psychological propensities, but ideas about Jews that were pervasive in Germany, and had been for decades, induced ordinary Germans to kill unarmed, defenseless Jewish men, women, and children by the thousands, systematically and without pity. (Goldhagen 1997:9, *my italics*)

Goldhagen insists upon a "thick description" that pictures people as literally incapable of acting against their beliefs, as locked in the iron grip of socially inculcated categories. "During the Nazi period, and even long before, most Germans could no more emerge with cognitive models foreign to their society . . . than they could speak fluent Romanian without ever having been exposed to it" (1997:34, see also 46). Even more than the Hawaiians as Sahlins portrays them, Goldhagen's Germans cannot think outside their particular cultural box.

Goldhagen's meditations on the iron grip of culture reaches full rhetorical flower when he characterizes the "autonomous power of the eliminationist antisemitism" as having "free rein to shape the Germans' actions to induce Germans voluntarily on their own initiative to act barbarously towards Jews . . ." (1997:449). How does one reconcile the paradoxical suggestion that beliefs have "autonomous power" and that people behave "voluntarily" and "on their own initiative"? Goldhagen's Germans, held in the almost literally hypnotic sway of beliefs, seem more like than different from Browning's "ordinary men." If Browning's soldiers display a puzzling moral numbness, Goldhagen's Germans appear rather too thoroughly culturally brainwashed. Both are moved to act by circumstances beyond their power to resist or control.

Goldhagen never recognizes, much less resolves, his own transformation of Germans into judgmental dopes.³⁶ But if Goldhagen's "thick description" is correct, his account becomes morally equivalent to functionalism. For functionalists, mass murders happen because, in the context of the system, they became the only practical option for a "final solution." For Goldhagen, genocide results because of a cultural outlook that was literally incapable of imagining Jews as deserving any fate except that which befell them. In both accounts, the people involved move blindly, mechanically, and most notably predictably in response to their environments.

A. D. Moses, as I noted above, nicely characterizes the theoretical and narrative strategies that suggest that the details of Holocaust historiography can be incorporated *ad infinitum* into empirically equivalent but logically incompatible strategies, one stressing structural-functional aspects, the other intentional. But, I have argued, Moses' analysis derails insofar as he accepts Goldhagen's formulation of the smile problem – "Not the method of killing, but the will to kill, is the key issue" (Moses 1998:213) – but fails to recognize that Goldhagen's account

offers no contrast to functionalist automatons (Moses 1998:217). Goldhagen portrays only determinism by other means. Moses, having stared the demon of cultural determinism in the face given the only two theoretical/narrative options, shrinks from drawing the requisite conclusion – Browning's social scientific approach and Goldhagen's ethnographic one simply do not differ on this point.³⁷

The actual debate thus only concerns by what path people came to be automatons, not whether or not they were. Neither Browning nor Goldhagen preserve the need for an understanding of perpetrator's actions, if by "understanding" in these cases one means a need to comprehend how individuals rationalize their behavior. For each locates perpetrators in "causally coercive" situations. The overwhelming majority of reservists were fated to behave as they did. Browning relies on "thin description" (not much cultural/historical background needed for explanation), Goldhagen on "thick" (a great deal of cultural background provided for explanation), but to the same effect. We have only judgmental dopes, and the explanatory dispute reduces to the terms of the conditioning. As Thomas Nagel remarks, "The effect of concentrating on the influence of what is not under his control is to make this responsible self seem to disappear, swallowed up by the order of mere events" (Nagel 1987:440). Moral luck determines whether or not one becomes a willing executioner.³⁸

In the previous section I argued that appeals to understanding offer no insight into the bases of intersubjectivity since multiple possibilities exist for "stabilizing" meaning, and nothing established that an "originary" meaning must play this role. Yet in the culturally nearer cases as well scouted in this section, no gain results by appeal to nonnatural meaning, albeit for somewhat different reasons. "Thinner" accounts of rationality need not invoke any "originary" or consciously deliberative element at all. Reconstructing behavior Browning's way engenders an account of that behavior as a product of its environment. But "thickening" the description does not enhance the case for nonnatural meaning either. In our example, there is only an "eliminationist anti-Semitism" so strong that people could not possibly think or choose other than as they did.³⁹ In neither case does an assumption regarding determinacy of meaning advance empirical work or eliminate the glaring (if different) psychological weaknesses of each account. Indeed, the "perpetrator" cases suggest that ceding a need for "special" understanding requires first a clear account of freedom of the will, for otherwise the situationalist explanations may plumb all the "depth" that there is to accounting for motivation.⁴⁰

Conclusion

The philosophical moral I urge from the cases surveyed in the last two sections is this: there is nothing nonnatural needed for purposes of the human sciences. For a supposed problem in accounting for why people did what they did exists only

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on the assumption that the agents possess some shared and prior complex of beliefs and motives. Reconstructing these becomes the task of a science of understanding. But whether people are culturally distant or culturally near does not effect the need to interpret or lessen the variability of possible accounts. Whatever we term "explanation" or "understanding" appeals in the end to our ongoing interactions with the world and each other.

In the end, I suggest, any controversy regarding how to parse the difference between explanation and understanding will go the way of the debate in biology on how to cut the difference between the living and nonliving. A strong intuition underwrote the thought that some essential biological difference must account for the difference between living matter and the rest, that such a difference is a difference in kind. But positing theoretical entities to account for this difference turned out to be a misdirected strategy. For as interesting as the difference between living and nonliving might be, making sense of it turned out not to require some essential differences in kind after all. Talk of entities and methods unique to the science of living matter yielded to talk of modes of organizing substances common to all matter. Such a unified scheme sufficed to do the job intended by a distinction in kind.

As for the biological sciences, so for the social sciences. For in the social sciences, what some kinds of reductionisms claim is that the issues of interest in the human sciences get answered (if they allow of scientific answer at all) within the panoply of the special sciences – it is all in our genes, it is all just behavior, and so on.⁴¹ But whether such claims are correct remains an open and empirical question even after one naturalizes understanding – sees it as of a piece with other forms of investigating the natural world.⁴²

My claim in this chapter is only that the enduring presumption that something must essentially separate the human from the natural sciences appears as theoretically groundless as the presumption that something essentially separates the living from the rest. At the very least, I have tried to show why those favoring a special science of understanding have yet to make a case for assuming an essential something, a "common meaning" or a "special perspective," for such a science to be about.⁴³

Notes

- 1 Good historical backgrounds to the intellectual origins of these debates are available in Karl-Otto Apel's *Understanding and Explanation* (1984) and Jürgen Habermas's *On the Logic of the Social Sciences* ([1968] 1988). In the analytic tradition, see Peter Winch's *The Idea of a Social Science* (1958). Richard Bernstein provides an excellent survey of the debate Winch inspired in *The Restructuring of Social and Political Theory* (1976). An important collection addressing Winch's work is Brian Wilson's *Rationality* (1970). For a recent survey of how Winch stands on the current scene, see Brian Fay's "Winch's philosophical bearings" (2000), as well as other articles in that issue.

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- 2 Without an argument for dividing the world in this special way – that which is the object of a science of understanding and that which is the object of natural science – meaning is indeterminate. There is no fact of the matter to meaning, no state of things requiring an ontology of meaning for purposes of explanation. As I have long argued, the need for a *prior justification* of a realm of meaning distinguishes the indeterminacy of meaning from garden variety theoretical underdetermination – the plethora of logically distinct but empirically equivalent explanatory theories. (See Roth 1987 and 2000.)
- 3 Dallmayr and McCarthy (1977:4). A clear and sophisticated introduction to historicism is David D. Roberts, *Nothing But History* (1995).
- 4 Jim Bohman tells me that this is a term Talcott Parsons uses and for a like purpose.
- 5 For a helpful and comprehensive introduction to the general intellectual background to Weber's views, see Georg G. Iggers (1997:chs. 1–3). Iggers also provides comprehensive references to relevant literature.
- 6 See, in particular, Gadamer's development of this point (1979:150f.).
- 7 "Translation" may be taken as the narrowest of the concepts concerning us here, for it involves the process by which one system of signs is converted into another. But translation is difficult to distinguish from interpretation, even if one seeks only analytic equivalences. For translation shades over into interpretation as one makes explicit justifications for how to map one idiom into another. I find no absolute distinction between what to count as translation and what as interpretation.
- 8 Gadamer anticipates and articulates what emerges as a fundamental objection to conceptions of historical or cultural realism. For, Gadamer notes, the realism becomes plausible only by turning what is a dynamic (historical) process into a static one. The natural sciences succeed on the basis that the processes governing change are static – that is what allows laws to be laws. But if what is taken to separate history and nature just is the former's lack of perduring general features, then champions of understanding cannot have it both ways. Understanding cannot be postured as apprehension of a dynamic process for purposes of distinguishing it in kind from the natural world but then be construed as a static process in order for the human sciences to have a reality to investigate. See, for example, Gadamer's remarks on "historical objectivism" (1979:158–9). The alleged "textuality" of the nature of the human sciences is, of course, a critical factor in debates regarding the "postmodern condition" in the human sciences. See Hans Kellner's chapter in this volume.
- 9 Key documents in this particular academic tempest are: Gananath Obeyesekere, *The Apotheosis of Captain Cook* ([1992] 1997) and Marshall Sahlins, *How "Natives" Think: About Captain Cook, For Example* (1995). For a "reader's guide to feuding anthropologists," see Clifford Geertz, "Culture wars" (1995) and Robert Borofsky, "Cook, Lono, Obeyesekere, and Sahlins" (1997). Ian Hacking weighs in on the dispute in *The Social Construction of What?* (1999:ch. 8).
- 10 As Clifford Geertz remarks:

What is at stake here is thus a question that has haunted anthropologists for over a hundred years, and haunts us even more now that we work in a decolonized world: What are we to make of cultural practices that seem to us odd and illogical? . . . In what precisely does reason lie? This is a question to be asked not about eighteenth-century Hawaiians. . . . It is to be asked as well about eighteenth-century Englishmen, sailors and navigators, wandering womanless about the oceans in search of discoveries . . . and of the

inquisitive, aggressive society, the knowledge-is-glory world that, hoping, ultimately, for a temporal salvation, sent the Englishmen there. (Geertz 1995:6)

- 11 See, for example, Marshall Sahlins (1981:20f.).
- 12 The Sahlins–Obeyesekere exchange invokes much of the rhetoric of debates regarding postmodernism, postcolonialism, etc. The intellectual/political issue is whether or not social science is just domination by other means. In this regard, the true *éminence grise* in this debate is Sir James Frazer and the tradition represented by *The Golden Bough* (1963). Ironically, where Winch imagines that defending the integrity of understanding “how natives think” requires disputing claims of a single standard of rationality, Obeyesekere seeks to preserve the integrity of native rationality by maintaining that it instantiates just such universal patterns. More on this below.
- 13 Cook’s return was open to the reinterpretation that Lono had come back to challenge the chiefs and priests for power. They met the challenge, but Cook’s death did not disprove the godly status which had been previously bestowed. The challenge and cultural response fit with prior understandings of the world.
- 14 Indeed, Obeyesekere imputes practical rationality to the Hawaiians but not to Cook – or, for that matter, to Sahlins. See Sahlins’ remarks (1981:148).
- 15 See also Obeyesekere ([1992] 1997:60).
- 16 But then, Sahlins complains, what people share by way of reasoning is precisely what is “*in principle independent of any specific cultural or historical knowledge.*” Obeyesekere’s Hawaiians are rational insofar as they cease thinking like Hawaiians (Sahlins 1995:150).
- 17 For an important critique of efforts to “map” the rules of social intercourse, see Stephen Turner (1994). This is not to say, of course, that one could not prefer one account to the other for good reasons, for example, one seems to accommodate the evidence more successfully than the other. As both Berel Dov Lerner and Karsten Stueber emphasized to me, rejecting meaning realism does not render the debate entirely pointless, or leave one only with the conclusion that any imputation of meaning is as good as any other.
- 18 Lukes has been remarkably consistent over three decades of discussing these issues. See his “Some problems about rationality” (1970), “Relativism in its place” (1982), and “Different cultures, different rationalities?” (2000).
- 19 This is the point of a key argument made in *Meaning and Method* (Roth 1987:ch. 9).
- 20 These are differences of degree, not of kind. Nothing turns on accepting my characterization of what is deviant or distant. The point I wish to emphasize is that problems of meaning do not depend on exotic cases. As Quine maintained, problems of translation begin at home.
- 21 A number of interesting interpretive debates flourish on various aspects of Holocaust historiography. One is the *Historikerstreit*, which concerns how to accommodate the Nazi period to the rest of modern German history. See, for example, Charles S. Maier (1997), Peter Baldwin (1990), but especially the exchange between Martin Broszat and Saul Friedlander and a special issue of the journal *History and Memory* (9, Fall 1997). A second concerns the latitude of interpretations available for the Holocaust, as represented by criticisms of the historical relativism imputed to Hayden White (see Friedlander 1992).
- 22 Hilberg’s magisterial and monumental work (1985) remains the place where any serious scholarly interest in these events must begin.

- 23 The classic statement of the intentionalist vs. functionalist theses as dividing the field in Holocaust historiography is Tim Mason, "Intention and explanation: A current controversy about the interpretation of National Socialism" (1981). Two interesting and significant efforts to survey and thematically organize the field are the ones by Michael R. Marrus, *The Holocaust in History* (1987) and "Reflections on the historiography of the Holocaust" (1994). Note, however, that the 1994 article attempts to arrange the field differently.
- 24 The classic statements are Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* ([1965]1990) and Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (1989). A strong hint of this position is in Hilberg's work as well (1985). See, for example, Bauman (1989:105-6). Asked "Why the Holocaust?" the functionalist accords no necessary place to anti-Semitism or to Germany. For an intentionalist, both of these factors are necessary. There is no obvious or apparent way to "split the difference" between the two theses.
- 25 One might argue that functionalists and intentionalists seek to answer different explanatory why questions. The functionalist answers the question: why *kill* (as opposed to deport, resettle, jail) Jews? The answer charts the "twisted road to Auschwitz" (see Schleunes 1970). Intentionalists answer the question: why kill *Jews* (rather than the French, Swedes, etc)? Anti-Semitism is the answer. Functionalists deny that killing was the goal from the outset; it is the unintended but inevitable consequence of other policies. Intentionalists insist that killing was the goal from the outset; the only questions were ones of manpower and opportunity. Browning the functionalist finds in Reserve Police Battalion 101 just "ordinary men" down on their moral luck; Goldhagen the intentionalist portrays "Hitler's willing executioners."
- 26 For a good introduction to the issues and key literature in this acrimonious and vexed debate, see A. D. Moses (1998).
- 27 All this leads Michael Marrus, in his review of this aspect of the literature in 1994, to quote Walter Laqueur's sardonic comment that, "While many Germans thought that the Jews were no longer alive, they did not necessarily believe that they were dead" (Marrus 1994:110).
- 28 As Robert Braun remarks, the "banality of evil was Arendt's answer to the choice problem. The 'banality of evil' does not answer our questions about the substance of the human soul but shows us the potential of 'thoughtless' acts" (1994:185).
- 29 Regarding the "perpetrator mentality," see John Sabini and Maury Silver, "Destroying the innocent with a clear conscience: A sociopsychology of the Holocaust" (1980).
- 30 Accounts of the genocidal killings beggar the imagination. A singularly striking example of this problem occurs in postwar testimony of a reservist which Browning cites. "I made the effort, and it was possible for me, to shoot only children. It so happened that the mothers led the children by the hand. My neighbor then shot the mother and I shot the child that belonged to her, because I reasoned with myself that after all without its mother the child could not live any longer" (1992a:73). None of these men were ever prosecuted for war crimes.
- 31 But see below with regard to how this remark comes back to haunt Goldhagen.
- 32 There are by now several books devoted to Goldhagen's work. For a sense of initial negative scholarly responses, see, for example, Geoff Eley (1997) or Omer Bartov (1996). See also Robert R. Shandley (1998).
- 33 Indeed, Goldhagen's generally acknowledged substantive contribution to the debate is his account of the death marches in chapters 13 and 14 of *Hitler's Willing Executioners*

(1997). Goldhagen appears to be on solid ground when he complains, against his critics, that however weak they may regard his account, still his is the only game in town, the only proposal on the table that responds to the smile problem (see, e.g., Goldhagen 1996).

- 34 This essay references much of the secondary literature generated by this debate. But even a casual glance through recent issues of journals such as *History and Theory* or *History and Memory* testifies to the continued strong interest in the historiography of the Holocaust.
- 35 This point Goldhagen repeats numerous times. See, for example, *Hitler's Willing Executioners* (1997:389-99) for a particularly explicit statement of how Goldhagen situates his account relative to those he opposes.
- 36 Instead, he maintains, Germans "were not automatons, but were responsible actors, were capable of making choices, and were ultimately the authors of their own actions" (1997:482). At the 1998 NEH Summer Institute, "The Idea of a Social Science - 40 Years Later," Dominic LaCapra lectured on Holocaust historiography. In that context he remarked that someone possessed by the past may be incapable of ethically responsible behavior. For LaCapra's own very thoughtful and nuanced views on the topic of Holocaust historiography, see his *Representing the Holocaust* (1994) and *History and Memory after Auschwitz* (1998).
- 37 Moses seems to think that a discussion of ideology goes proxy for agency (see his "Conclusion" 1998:217-19). But, for all the reasons rehearsed above, there is just no reason to believe that one is any less "conditioned" to adopt an ideology than anything else.
- 38 Goldhagen's willingness early on to invoke Kant against his opponents proves deeply ironic. For a Kantian would expect people to be able to morally elevate above their culture by the force of reason alone and perceive moral truth by dint of reason alone. But Goldhagen so chains his Germans to their cultural beliefs that any such elevation becomes impossible.
- 39 The barbarism cannot be traced exclusively or even primarily to those with some prior history of or commitment to anti-Semitism. This is chillingly brought home in the way in which colleagues and neighbors turn on one another. See, for example, Victor Klemperer, *I Will Bear Witness: A Diary of the Nazi Years, 1933-1941* (1998).
- 40 Habermas's championing of Goldhagen is to be explained by his view that what Goldhagen provides can be used to make people reflect on the consequences of their "common sense" views about others. Here again we find a strong echo of issues involved in the Obeyesekere-Sahlins version.

Cannot certain accounts be just ruled out, the contingencies of who wins wars or who controls presses notwithstanding? The literature here is vast. No attempt to assess specific historiographic controversies should ignore the following general background works: Gene Wise, *American Historical Explanations* (1980), Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (1988), Georg G. Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century* (1997), and Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (1973). See also White's two influential collections of essays, *The Content of the Form* (1987), and *Tropics of Discourse* (1978). A good introduction to White's work is Wulf Kansteiner, "Hayden White's critique of the writing of history" (1993). See also Fay et al. *History and Theory: Contemporary Readings* (1998).

- 41 For more on these issues, see the essay by Lynn Hankinson Nelson in this volume.
- 42 For an interesting and illuminating account of the historical background to the debate in biology, see Ronald Munson, "Mechanism, vitalism, reductionism, and organismic biology" (1979). For an insightful account of how resistance to reductionism gets confused and mistakenly intertwined with a resistance to naturalism, see Clifford Geertz, "The strange estrangement: Taylor and the natural sciences" in *Available Light* (2000:83-95).
- 43 I wish to thank James Bohman, Larry Davis, Laura Howard, Berel Dov Lerner, Piers Rawling, Karsten Stueber, and Stephen Turner for help with an earlier draft of this paper.

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Edited by

Stephen P. Turner and Paul A. Roth

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Introduction. Ghosts and the Machine: Issues of Agency, Rationality, and Scientific Methodology in Contemporary Philosophy of Social Science

Stephen P. Turner and Paul A. Roth

This anthology surveys an intellectual landscape vastly and importantly reshaped over the last 25 years. Historically, the philosophy of the social sciences has been an inquiry loosely organized around the problem of the scientific status of social knowledge. This problematic emerged with social sciences themselves in the latter part of the nineteenth century and continued, in one form or another, to dominate discussion through the better part of the next. A trio of core issues – the scientific status of intentional explanations (and agency), the nature of rationality, and the methodological hallmarks of science – seemingly persist through current discussion and debate. But the substance attached to these issues has fundamentally shifted and altered. Without examining details of the substantive changes, the shifts in the subject matter remain obscured. This introduction examines these shifts and proposes an explanation of how and why they occur.

Whatever science is thought to be, it is, at the minimum, a science of the natural world. The questions this formulation raises are: can we have scientific knowledge of the social world? If so, what does “scientific knowledge” mean? Philosophy of science focuses primarily on answers to the second question. Philosophy of social science traditionally has taken those answers and attempted to determine if the conditions making scientific knowledge possible in the natural realm obtain for the social order as well. The guiding assumption in all of this is that an answer to the question of what constitutes the nature of scientific knowledge