

THE PROBLEM OF PRIMACY IN HISTORICAL EXPLANATION

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Abstract: *The significance of methodology goes beyond just being a reflection of how academics conduct their research. In a sense, methodology also dictates the legitimacy and soundness of the research outcomes. With this consideration, this paper examines the explanatory approaches that philosophers employ in their research and the arguments for the validity of such approaches. The two prominent ones in philosophy and other social sciences are methodological individualism vis-à-vis methodological holism. While the proponents of the former place a premium on individuals as an appropriate explanatory guide to research and emphasize that social regularity or phenomenon is grounded in individual motivations and behaviors, the latter places emphasis on society and the many social groupings that exist within it as the most important components of the historical process. Both approaches have made credible contributions to our knowledge. However, regardless of the fact that each approach is potent in furnishing us with particular truth at the micro and macro levels of history, none is capable of the 'whole truth. Therefore, it is suggested to carefully consider the intermediate school as a balance between methodological individualism and methodological holism. Therefore, by integrating the intermediate school as a compromise between methodological individualism and methodological holism, methodological approaches in the social sciences can be enhanced for better outcomes.*

Keywords: methodological individualism, historical processes, historiographical methods, speculative philosophy of history, causal explanation, societal influences.

1. Introduction

For a long time, philosophers and historians have been subjecting historical processes and historiographical methods to philosophical engagements through philosophical reflections. The 20th century saw a number of distinct schools of thought in the philosophy of history; however, one school of thought that emerged was known as the speculative philosophy of history. This school of thought seeks to gain a profound understanding of actual historical shifts and promotes a political ideology that is amenable to widespread adoption. The term "historical explanation" does not refer to a specific method for elucidating the happenings of the past; rather, it refers to any and all methods that are utilized with reference to objectives, purposes, reasons, and aims, as opposed to narratives that are more broadly applicable (Fisk, 1982).

As is to be expected with any idea, there is a significant amount of disagreement among philosophers over a singular viewpoint for the explanation of historical events (White, 1943). Some people believe that historical explanation is an application of the paradigm of scientific explanation to subject an event to causal law as an instance of the law. Other people, however, believe that historical explanation is rather a rational-explanatory purpose and standard that provides insight into causal sequence (Raji, 2019). In spite of the fact that they are different, these points of view tend to share the consensus that the historical explanation is the explanation of causes. The historian is responsible for compiling all of the pertinent historical causal information that is necessary to adequately explain the events of the past. In contrast to the scientific and social sciences, the explanation of historical events does not adhere to a strict criterion for the construction of ideas that may be generalized to events that will occur in the future or in related fields (Meyer, 2015).

There is no theoretical prescription that educates historiography about how facts signal an event or what that event is. Despite this, it is predicted that explanations of the past would have characteristics such as "non-standardized, non-detachability, and non-aggregativity" (Lemon, 2003). Also, since different narratives are used to explain different events and different causal sequences, they cannot aggregate. This means that there is no accumulation of historical knowledge. Each version of a historical story can only be evaluated on its own merits; subsequent versions cannot be built upon earlier versions (Roth, 2016). Analytical philosophers were the first to tackle the issue of historical knowledge and explanation, but the discussion has now shifted to the philosophy of science and action. The post-Wittgenstein and pragmatic

methods have kept the historicizing of philosophical analysis, as well as the philosophical concerns of history and historiography, alive.

A modern issue of philosophical significance in the field of history is the question of whether the individual or society should be given precedence. This issue is essential to the historical investigation and determination of what caused what. A full understanding of historical events may be obtained through the use of historical explanation and storytelling. The study of historical events and the explanation of those events are both done with a reasonable acceptance of causality as a legitimate instrument. A simple recounting of an event from the past is not sufficient to qualify as history, according to the theory and practice of history. As a result, we anticipate that the historical explanation will provide responses to numerous inquiries on what, why, and how events in the past transpired in the manner in which they did. The question "why" is at the heart of all of the inquiries, which brings up the issue of causality in the context of historical explanation.

Logical thinking, which in turn dictates choices and decisions, is the foundation upon which an individual's activities and relationships within society are built. In historical explanation and narrative, several reasons are attributed to historical events in order to provide a comprehensive knowledge of those events. Because a mono-causal explanation is implausible under all circumstances, multi-causality is not accepted on its own but rather in conjunction with the hierarchy of causal importance that it entails. As a consequence of this, the causes are graded and organized into categories such as remote causes, immediate causes, and trigger causes, according to their relevance to the event. When attempting to order the causes according to the value of their contributions, one runs into the difficulty of deciding which should take precedence: the individual or society.

2. The Concept of Primacy

Although there may be occasional debates over its ultimate significance, the primary purpose of historical explanation is focused on a different aspect. The vast array of historical explanations serves as evidence against logical efforts to simplify complex language into clear-cut meanings. Comprehensive conceptual studies are unable to cover all possible uses of the terms they want to clarify (Novaes, 2020). Examining a few closely related instances of a specific phrase will help clarify the understanding of the connection between two terms. This study's elucidation of numerous philosophical issues comes from a precise idea that, as George Santayana astutely observed, "becomes indescribable as soon as we attempt to strictly describe it." The phrase is facing difficulties in being comprehended within a limited amount of logical space due to unjust restrictions imposed by different methods of analysis. The term 'primacy' encompasses both the word and the concept (Drucker, 2020). The use of the phrase 'it's prior to' creates confusion regarding two different meanings of 'primacy' in historical explanation (Terzi, 2021). The first sense pertains to a direct explanatory relationship that exists between specific events and other events (Cokenour, 2023). The second sense, pertaining to reliance, is only indirectly related to the explanatory relationship between a term and another term. Meeting the criteria for the latter does not necessarily mean that the phrase in issue meets the criteria for the former (Bortolan, 2022). To establish explanatory primacy in the direct sense, a two-part test must demonstrate that the events in question are both chronologically the first among all events that are connected by an explanatory relationship and that the events that are explained by the prior occurrence of the chronologically first event exist solely because of their involvement in the explanation (Agamben, 2024).

3. Discourse

Different schools of thought exist when it comes to the question of what caused historical events (causation) and what part individuals and societies played in the unfolding of those events. Different philosophical perspectives might be taken into consideration while analyzing the theoretical arguments. In this way, there are three separate schools of thought: the individualist, the collectivist, and the intermediate schools. The Collectivist, also known as the Holist, argues that the individual has no reality apart from the society; the Individualist, on the other hand, argues that the individual makes up the society rather than the other way around; and the Intermediate, on the other hand, argues that neither the individual nor the society can exist in isolation from each other (Collingwood, 1999).

4. The Collectivist or Holist School

The collectivist or Holist schools of thought consider social organizations to be more important than individuals. It places an emphasis on society and the many social groupings that exist within it as the most important component of the historical process. It contends that the person cannot live as an island and

that the preexisting conditions in society typically make the action and reaction of the individual unavoidable. Furthermore, it asserts that the individual cannot exist as an island. Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, John Donne, and a number of other advocates of "Historical Materialism" are all considered to be members of this organization (Giddens, 1981). This viewpoint is encapsulated in a passage taken from Donne's sermon, which states that "no man is an island whole by itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a portion of the main...". The Marxists believe that historically unfolding social relations and not some "transhistorical human nature" are the primary influences on individual and social life in general (Gottlieb, 1979).

It illustrates in further detail that the individual possesses nothing that they did not get from society. Not only do individuals not acquire awareness, experiences, or even language on their own, but these things are acquired from society. These are considered to be significant aspects of human subjectivity because they are present within a social system and are subsequently communicated to the people who make up that social system (Roth, 2016). Carr views the individual in isolation from society as being both "speechless and mindless." He contends that society works to transform the human being from a purely biological entity into a social unit from the moment of birth. This process continues until the individual reaches adulthood. Through the various forms of socialization, society has communicated to the individual the numerous concepts, norms, beliefs, and values that he proclaims (Carr, 2018). The environment and the social groups in which a person participates shape his character as well as his way of thinking. When it comes to the question of whether or not an individual possesses free will, collectivist say that the range of possibilities that are open to an individual is both offered and constrained by the society in which they live. The breadth and depth of man's understanding would be precisely related to the extent and intensity of his experience of the environment in which he resides (Olorunfemi, 2011).

This school of thought contends that an individual's behaviors and emotions are the product of their exposure to and participation in society, rather than the outcome of genetic heredity. Even when a person asserts that they have free will, they still have to choose from the options that society has provided and use the judgment that society has developed. The Collectivists, for instance, view Napoleon Bonaparte's ascent to the positions of emperor of France and conquistador of Europe as a direct result of the French Revolution. He is seen more as a product of the conditions that existed at the time than as the mastermind behind his own good fortune. This school of thought supports the concept of environmental determinism and emphasizes the significance of geography. The individual's choice of profession, diet, and clothing, as well as their religious views and practices, are all influenced by their surroundings. In order to reach this conclusion, it is sufficient to assert that society is higher up on the hierarchy of causes in the context of historical explanation than the individual. This is due to the fact that society provides the enabling environment and the prerogative for the action of the individual in the historical process.

5. The Individualist School

The individualist school of thought places a premium on the individual as the most significant and decisive force in the unfolding of historical events. It consists of the proponents of methodological individualism, which refers to the explanatory approach that attributes primacy to individual actions and reactions in social events (Picavet, 2001). It contends that an individual's role as a causal agent in a social event is both significant and obligatory for providing an account of historical events. It contends that the person is the most significant factor in any particular occurrence and that this aspect, rather than societal forces, ought to be granted precedence in any analysis of causality. It also argues on the side of reason and the ethics of history. The school makes a compelling case that history, as a field of study, investigates the actions that humans have carried out in the past and questions why an emphasis should be placed on society in historical explanation. It then becomes absurd to assign primacy to anything other than the individual in historical explanation.

Isaiah Berlin, Max Weber, Thomas Carlyle, Karl Popper, John Watkins, and John Mill are just a few of the renowned individuals that belong to this group. They claim that even if the person is part of society, society cannot survive without the individual since the individual is necessary to society. According to Hossain and Ali (2014), society should serve individuals rather than the other way around. The idea that "the individual cannot survive without society, while society cannot exist without the individual" places the emphasis on the individual's ability to survive rather than the individual's ability to exist without society, despite the fact that the existence of society is tied to the individual. It begs the issue of how a society that can only exist because of the contributions of the individuals inside can be the force that

decides what an individual does. Therefore, the behaviors of the individual as well as society as a whole are entirely dependent on the individual.

An individual is viewed more as a force of nature, such as a river that sweeps everything away in its current or a storm that determines the course of other things, than as a member of a community that is arbitrary and capricious. Individuals are responsible, not chance or natural processes, for the occurrence of historical events. Therefore, the French Revolution, which the Collectivist views as being responsible for the rise to power of Napoleon Bonaparte, was not the product of a meteorological or climatic condition but rather of the actions and reactions of individuals. Additionally, Napoleon was not the only person alive during the period of the revolution. Therefore, his rise to prominence was based on his attributes, choices, and decisions.

Berlin contends that a significant amount of determinism is brought into the historical process whenever historical events are explained in terms of social forces (Berlin, 2013). This school of thought maintains that determinism, also known as fatalism, which has no place in historical explanation, has taken place whenever the individual is not given prominence in the explanation of historical events. When social causes take precedence over individual causes, a person's acts can neither be commended nor criticized in any way for their significance. This would indicate that an individual participating in the historical process would have acted in the same way that any other person would have. The fact that individuals in any given society do not adhere to a particular pattern is an inherent weakness in the system. Even an individual does not adhere to a certain pattern; as a result, the choices and decisions that he makes are erratic. Mill's claim that "men are not, when joined together, changed into another type of material" (Mill, 2002) strengthens the argument. A good illustration of this can be found in the process of historical explanation, in which the historian selects pertinent facts that are suitable for the explanation. Additionally, even when given the same facts, the historian can produce a work that is unique from those of other historians thanks to his free will and individuality. This demonstrates that, despite being composed of individuals, society does not deprive any of its members of their identity. Therefore, if society were the true determinant of the activities of the individual, then all individuals in any given society should respond and react in the same way to the problems that are present in that society.

6. The Intermediate School

The intermediate school serves as a compromise between the two opposing schools of thought. It has fewer proponents, but those proponents argue for both schools yet reject the conclusions of both schools. This causes them to occasionally be misclassified as members of either of the other two schools. Hegel, for example, considers the individual to be a rational and passionate agent who is not an isolated individual. In spite of the fact that individuals are dependent on their societies, it is impossible to place too much importance on the capacity of their free will (Muthukrishna et al.2021). The fact that Herodotus wrote the "Histories," which were based on the causes and developments of the Peloponnesian war, serves as an illustration of this viewpoint. It is undeniably true that, without the war, he could not have written the book. The war, a societal factor, provided Herodotus with a purpose. Though he was not the only individual in society, he wrote the book that set him apart from the others. As long as individuals continue to break barriers and boundaries set by society, society cannot be accorded primacy in historical explanation. Though the significance of societal causes cannot be overlooked in historical explanation (Goldstein, 1977).

Georg Hegel suggests that providential design instances are limited and focus on fulfilling the desires of the individual (Hegel 2001: 27). In addition, Edward Carr's reasoning considers the roles of both individuals and society. He recognizes the inherent interdependence of both entities in the unfolding of historical events. Carr contends that "by bringing individuals together and constituting them into a society, one does not necessarily rob them of their individuality." However, Carr believes that it is a fallacy to suppose that individuals existed in any sense other than biological or had any kind of substance prior to being brought together (Olorunfemi, 2011).

The Intermediate contends that there is no circumstance in which human behaviors are wholly predetermined, except in the cases of hypnosis, manipulation, or coercion. Neither are they ever exclusively based on free will. This does not discredit any of the other positions since neither the collectivist nor the individualist denies the existence of both individual and societal causes. (Anttila, 1993). Their sole point of contention is the hierarchy of these factors. Hence, the perspectives of the two schools are not entirely contradictory to those of the Intermediate. In fact, it makes a case for both schools of thought and accepts the premises presented by both sides of the debate, but it does not draw any conclusions since doing so is unnecessary. Carr regards the problem of assigning primacy between the

individual and society as a cyclical narrative that may be likened to the proverbial controversy of the primacy between "the hen and the egg." He believes that the answer lies somewhere in the middle (Carr, 2016).

Different Approaches to Causality in History

The concept being discussed is known as an individual, and the form of causality associated with it is intricately linked to a structural relationship and closely tied to theoretical or idealised abstraction. This form of causality plays a crucial role in distinguishing the objectivity of individuals in the real world from that of hypothetical atoms, whose collisions could potentially lead to real-world actions (Scholz, 2020). According to Clark and Winegard (2020), this concept is not new but rather has been a fundamental aspect of ancient philosophy. The substantial significance of contemporary scientific practice provides fresh perspectives on the cognitive shift that led humans to focus their thinking on the connections between events and the characteristics of other entities (Azoulay & Lynn, 2020; Bryan et al., 2021). The contrast between the logical framework of objective explanation and theoretical explanation is apparent, as emphasised by Doyle and Conboy (2020). The typical logic demonstrated here is our inclination to abstract from historical context without relying on concepts such as the deprivation principle or other auxiliary assumptions, and to affirm the self-identity or equivalence of individuals (Marginson, 2022). This approach establishes a connection between the concept of causation and the complex interconnections between the tangible and intangible aspects of reality. It views history as an investigation into the specific factors that account for the disparities between the actual world and the hypothetical world of atoms. This procedure is crucial for differentiating items that need to be explained from those that are solecismic (Smith, 2021; Evans, 2021).

White (2020) argues that the most basic example of the logical structure of explanation in history is quite ordinary: an event is explained by stating that it is the way it is because it is the way it is. This strategy, which is redundant and repetitive, does not succeed in proving the logical requirement of differentiating distinct events as being dissimilar. It does not contribute to history's ability to establish similarities with other fields of study, nor does it provide insight into the specific categories that make up historical issues. In order to comprehend the unique way in which history sets itself apart, it is necessary to examine another means of conveying causality (Bhat et al., 2023).

The connection between the idea of causality and modern systems is apparent when we consider causality not just in terms of rules that regulate changes in nature or society, but also in terms of its role in supporting factual explanations (Kim, 2023). Therefore, causality is attributed to an entity not only when it functions as the outcome of another causal entity, but also when it arises from the intrinsic features that govern its behaviour or, in simpler terms, determine its inherent nature (Bareinboim et al., 2022).

Linear Conceptions of Causality

Weber's social theory utilises the unilinear model as a rhetorical tool to clarify and distinguish important processes in historical sociological study (Waye et al., 2023). Jiang (2023) employs this model to highlight the diverse significance of economic and demographic elements in building human societies. This model guides societies towards certain institutional structures and generates unique patterns of class connections. Weber's utilisation of the unilinear conception of history diverges from the principle of nomothetic derivation. He does not employ it to create a model for identifying the co-responsible constitutive factors of historically observed phenomena, nor does he utilise it as a direct explanatory framework (Guhin et al., 2021; Amason, 2020).

Historiography has thoroughly examined the distinguishing characteristics of historical explanation compared to those commonly seen in the natural sciences. An essential concern revolves around the nature of linear causality, which is a defining feature of historical explanation, and how it relates to the linear causality observed in natural sciences or deductive mental structures. The subject of primacy in historical explanation is inherently connected to the concept of linear causality (Oleksowicz, 2021). Multiple passive structural approaches to linear causation represent different viewpoints on the issue of priority in historical explanation. Weber recognises several crucial notions, including the investigation of the typology and meaningful progression of historical events, the typology of interpretative frameworks necessary for ranking explanations, and the categorization of historical sciences into extensive and detailed typologies.

Complex Systems and Nonlinear Dynamics

Emergent characteristics are a fundamental and essential feature of complex systems. The concept that a complex adaptive system exhibits emergent qualities that are greater than the sum of its separate components is often emphasised. Emergence is a concept that is difficult to define and has thus been carefully studied (Cohen et al., 2022). Discussions on emergence frequently resonate with Samuel Butler's concept of an organic entity, characterised as a transition from "a combination of functional elements" to "cognitive entities," and ultimately to "entities that exhibit altruistic behaviour" (Benbya et al., 2020). In biological situations, emergent features often arise from the self-organizing or autocatalytic dynamics of aggregates. The amplification processes that occur naturally are a consequence of feedback mechanisms inside networks of interacting elements, where interactions give rise to intricate patterns that result in multiplicative, rather than additive, effects on the allocation of limited resources (An et al., 2021). These feedback processes are widely acknowledged as significant factors that contribute to the nonlinearity that is prevalent in such systems. The study of these specific points where emergent behaviour occurs in complex adaptive systems has been thorough and longstanding, predating their explicit recognition as separate examples of complex phenomena (Wilson, 2021; Polese et al., 2021).

The Role of Agency and Structure in Historical Primacy

Historically, the topic connects to inquiries on the division of time periods and the patterns of progression (Brzechczyn, 2020). Does the advent of state properties offer a vital understanding of European state formation, or did the European provinces adjust to the many forms that arose? In other important historical contexts, there is ongoing discussion on whether the emergence of capitalism, the introduction of new agricultural methods, or the advancement of industrial calculus were indicative of previous societal shifts (Epple, 2020; Rodriguez, 2022). Did these events occur due to a combination of new opportunities where human behaviour or governmental measures played a major role? Did the establishment of a liberal economic order or a nation's rise to great power status result from a mix of long-term societal changes and organised preferences that limited options to an almost predetermined state? Were the distinguishing qualities of these conjunctures the result of a scenario where possibilities remained open enough, notwithstanding social tendencies, to allow for a wider range of paths for change? (Stone et al., 2021).

The historical dispute on the supremacy of structural forces or substantial changes versus the primacy of conjunctural elements primarily concerns the explanation of social change. The topic of social order has been a fundamental aspect of sociological debates for a considerable period of time (Avelino, 2021). Once a structure has formed, it becomes important to determine if it serves solely as a prerequisite or if it also functions as a powerful influence that goes beyond the limits set by the constitution. On the other hand, the environmental background, or the "human habitat," has a significant role in shaping activities, according to Etzioni-Halevy (2024). The societal repercussions of this argument are multifaceted and inspire a wide range of disagreements in sociology. The potential for human autonomy and its consequences are as complex as the disputes surrounding the existence and development of social structures (Young, 2020).

7. Case Studies in Historical Primacy

In the latter section of his extensive book on *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Gibbon (2015) suggests the approach he believes should be used to answer the problem of historical interpretation (Womersley, 2022). 'The decline of Rome was a direct result of its excessive magnificence'; for instance, 'the arrival of barbarians was caused by the decline of Rome' (White, 2023). Gibbon's theme is limited to 'the establishing of his design and the measurement of his monuments', and these general truths are sufficient for it. The situation is not straightforward for modern researchers, who are still intrigued by a topic that has been extensively unraveled but has not yet been consolidated and organized in the records of tradition (Tepperman & Rickabaugh, 2023). Even though "material" explanations of the "fall" are more than a century old, they still have value. Their value lies not so much in providing positive proof for a specific situation (such as land and wealth) within the overall decline but rather in highlighting the unintended consequences of different systems. (Schaff, 2024)

The fundamental social structures and pressures that led to the steady rate of technological progress and economic growth in the West over a thousand years can be attributed to various factors (Goldstone, 2002). These include the transition from a society characterized by knighthood and mass exploitation or slavery to one that values political freedom and scientific advancement. It is important to note that the developed world does not condone suicide as a means to encourage technological and

scientific progress. Most accounts that have not examined important sources do not have a comprehensive understanding, let alone detailed knowledge, of the Industrial Revolution (Wray et al., 2011). This historical event marked a significant moment when technological progress became self-generating, possibly for the first time. It is important to acknowledge that modern Japan provides compelling evidence that the rates of technical advancement and catch-up are distinct concepts (Oldenzel, 2006).

Consider the ongoing dispute over the correlation between technical advancement and the level of human involvement in such endeavors. If the supply is bigger, indicating a larger number of individuals involved in entrepreneurial activities, the question that follows is: "What is the reason behind this increased supply? In other words, why are there more individuals aspiring to innovate, write novels, or establish businesses?" "Which organism was the precursor, the chicken or the egg?" However, the crucial inquiry revolves around determining the factors that establish the highest achievable rate, identifying the upper and lower boundaries of the system, and examining whether there exist societal and political frameworks that promote a specific rate of growth over another. Does the government, for instance, have a role in promoting progress in the United States? Has the government hindered the rate of technological advancement in pre-World War II Britain, which is now unfortunately compounded by the educational system's refusal to teach the exploration of new ideas in the field of education? It is worth noting that many Nobel laureates were outsiders in their respective fields when they made their groundbreaking discoveries, as they were not formally trained in those specific areas (Taylor, 2002).

8. Conclusion

The never-ending debate on the primacy of the individual versus society consists of two camps: the individualist, who believes in the preponderant role of the individual in historical processes and tends to see heroes and villains as crucial factors in historical development, and the collectivist, who sees individuals in historical processes as the by-products of society. Both camps are arguing that the individual or society is more important than the other in historical development. Although it is impossible to ignore the underlying validity of both sides of the argument, this does not make one position more compelling than the other. While both the individualist and collectivist schools have valid points, they represent opposite ends of a continuum, leading to the introduction of the intermediate school. The intermediate school is the school of enlightenment because it brings together the truth that may be obtained from both arguments but avoids coming to any conclusions. Therefore, the intermediate stands for a middle ground between the two, but it does not take a stance. Despite the fact that this school does not belittle the actions of the individual or his contributions to the historical process, it maintains the view that it is impossible for the individual to live apart from society. It is impossible to have history without the individual. Despite individual endeavors and achievements, autonomy relies on the societal context in which one exists. Therefore, a balanced consideration of the roles of the individual and society in historical processes is essential, transcending the theoretical and philosophical debates on primacy. In historical explanation, hierarchy should be granted to causal facts based on the significance and relevance they have to the historical event, rather than on whether or not they are individual or societal causes of the historical event.

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