

Popperian Situational Analysis

As Popper acknowledges in his intellectual autobiography *Unended Quest*, he was always more interested in the natural sciences than the social sciences (*UQ*, 121). Nonetheless, Popper devoted considerable thought to the social sciences, and in the *Poverty of Historicism*, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, and a number of essays, he offered sustained reflections on the methods of social science (*OSE II*, 89–99; *PS*, 357–365; *ISBW*, 64–81; *MF*, 154–181). In general, and especially in his earlier essays, Popper was largely intent on showing that the methods of the social sciences are, or at least should be, the same as those of the natural sciences.¹ But what *is* the method of natural science, according to Popper? In chapters 2 and 3 I shall consider in some detail Popper’s highly original answer to this question. But here I can briefly note that Popper contended that, fundamentally, the natural and the social sciences both involve proposing hypotheses and testing them against empirical evidence—the bolder the hypotheses, the better. The most daring of such hypotheses, and the ultimate aim of any mature science, are scientific laws, Popper says (*RAS*, 134). Because scientific laws are universal in their scope, they permit parsimonious explanations and produce genuine predictive power. But, at the same time, the far-ranging explanatory power of general laws exposes them widely and repeatedly to falsification. For this reason, falsifiability—especially a high degree of falsifiability—became the hallmark of science for Popper.

Especially in his earlier writings, Popper argued that hypotheses testing and the search for general laws should also be the goal of the social sciences (*PH*, 61–62).² However, despite Popper’s strong support for the unity of scientific method, he also recommended a unique approach for studying the social world—a method that, he admitted, has almost no direct parallel in the natural sciences and that represented “perhaps the most important difference” between the natural and social sciences (*PH*, 141; see also *UQ*, 117).³ That method is, of course, situational analysis. In chapter 3, I will argue that Popper himself did not fully appreciate how different situational analysis is from the method of natural sciences. We will see that the difference between the two

approaches is so great that the unity of scientific method can only be retained by describing methodology at a highly abstract (and therefore largely uninformative) level. But in this chapter, I want to present the concept of situational analysis as proposed by Popper, including its relationship to other Popperian ideas on social inquiry, especially his support for methodological individualism and his rejection of psychologism and methodological collectivism. The following discussion will draw mainly upon Popper's lengthiest and last sustained explanation of situational analysis—his "Models, Instruments, and Truth" essay. However, I will also draw liberally upon Popper's other discussions of situational analysis and social science generally.

BUILDING MODELS

Popper begins his discussion of situational analysis by positing that the fundamental goal of science is problem solving and that there are, broadly speaking, two types of problems in need of explanation: singular events and types or kinds of events (*MF*, 162–166; *PS*, 357). Explaining a singular event—such as the collision of Shoemaker-Levy 9 comet with Jupiter in 1994, the eruption of Mount St. Helens in 1980, the French Revolution, or the near collapse of Asian economies in 1997—merely requires identifying some relevant initial conditions along with some universal laws in order to predict (or retrodict) and explain the event. For example, to explain Shoemaker-Levy 9's collision with Jupiter, one would need to identify such initial conditions as the position, mass, and velocity of the comet and other celestial bodies at successive points in time, combined with some relevant universal laws, including gravity and Newton's laws of motion.

Explaining a kind or type of event—that is, an event that recurs in a more or less predictable pattern—requires a somewhat different approach, Popper says. Examples of types or kinds of events would be lunar eclipses in general (not last month's eclipse), cycles of economic expansion and recession (rather than the U.S. recession in 1991–92 and the following expansion), political revolutions in general (not the French Revolution or the American Revolution or the Iranian Revolution). The best way to explain types of events, Popper suggests, is to construct a "model," which, he says, is merely a simplified representation of reality. Being a simplification of reality, it will of necessity be a false depiction of reality. For instance, in order to simplify calculations, a model of the solar system might assume that the various planets are points and that comets and other extraplanetary objects have no gravity, even though such assumptions are plainly false. No model can incorporate all elements of the phenomena to be explained, nor would such a model be desirable. Rather, a good model represents the most important features of reality, given our explanatory interests. Popper acknowledges that there is probably no formal way to state beforehand how those features should be selected; rather, a model's value will ultimately be proved by its usefulness. "I think we have to

admit," he says, "that most successful scientific theories are lucky oversimplifications" (*MF*, 171–172).

However, the elements or structural features alone of a model are not enough to explain a typical event. To "animate" the model, Popper says, we need universal laws. Thus the planets in a model of the solar system are set in motion by Newton's laws of gravity and momentum, and a model of an atom is animated by the strong and weak forces, and electromagnetism. No model can do without animating universal laws, Popper claims, for we can "never reduce animating laws to structural properties of the model" (*MF*, 164). This is not to say that we can never offer a deeper explanation of a universal law by developing a model of the law itself—a mechanistic description of the elements and structures that explain how the law operates and produces its effects. In fact, Popper encourages such mechanistic reductions; indeed, he says, they are an important goal of science (*RAS*, 134). Popper's point is rather that a model, no matter how fine-grained, can never animate itself, for new, deeper laws will be required to set it in motion and the process will begin anew. For Popper, there are no ultimate explanations that are "neither capable of any further explanation, nor in need of it" (*OK*, 194). This is one way of characterizing Popper's anti-essentialism, which claims that there can be no explanation of phenomena that is self-evident, intuitive, and irreducible. Science can and should always delve deeper into reality, Popper says, and thus there is never an end to scientific investigation (*ibid.*).

MODELS AND SOCIAL SCIENCE

Models are often essential for explaining types of events in the natural sciences. They are even more important in the social sciences, Popper asserts, because we "never have sufficient laws and initial conditions at our disposal to explain" social events (*MF*, 168).⁴ As such, following Friedrich Hayek, Popper says that the social sciences generally must settle for "explanation in principle" rather than "explanation in detail"—that is, explanation of typical events rather than explanation of actual events (*MF*, 166). The best way to produce such explanations, he argues, is to construct models of typical social situations. For this reason, he says, constructing models of social situations is a central task of social science: "The fundamental problem of the social sciences is *to explain and understand events in terms of human actions and social situations*. The key term here is '*social situation*'" (*MF*, 166; Popper's italics).⁵

But what does a model of a social situation contain? Popper says that it consists of people and social relations, broadly understood. Social relations would include, for example, social institutions (such as bureaucratic regulations, financial markets, legal codes, and the like) as well as traditions and social norms. In addition to other people and social relations, a situational model will also include relevant features of the natural environment, such as natural laws and physical barriers that constrain people's behavior. At the center of the situational model is

the human actor, whose aims and knowledge of the situation are also part of the model. To illustrate this idea, Popper imagines the situation confronting a person—Popper dubs him “Richard”—attempting to cross the street (*MF*, 166–168). The physical barriers encountered by Richard in such a situation might include cars, other pedestrians, median strips, and so forth. The institutional and social elements might include rules of the road, traffic signals, cross-walk markings, and such. The situation also includes Richard’s goals or aims—in this case, to cross the street—and the person’s knowledge of the situation, which includes relevant theories and concepts that he possesses. Knowledge of the social situation in Popper’s example of the pedestrian would include not only the physical obstacles that the person can see and hear, but also his understanding of social institutions that influence his action, such as the rules of the road and the meaning of traffic signals.

Of course, a person’s understanding of the situation may be imperfect, and these imperfections may affect his or her actions. Richard’s failure to notice a speeding car—a physical component of the situation—might explain his failure to cross the road. Similarly, Richard’s misinterpretation of a social rule may also affect his action. Perhaps, improbably, he interprets the red light on the traffic signal to mean “go.” A full-blown situational model will include both a description of the situation as it actually was and the situation as the actor perceived it (*MF*, 183 n. 19). In other words, the social scientist must strive to produce an objective reconstruction of situation faced by Richard, as well as a reconstruction of Richard’s own assessment of the situation. Often, disparities between the two accounts will prove key in explaining the agent’s behavior.

THE RATIONALITY PRINCIPLE

To complete the situational model, Popper says we need to animate it by means of what he calls the “rationality principle.” Unlike economists and rational choice theorists, Popper never developed a precise definition of rationality in this context. In chapter 4, we will examine Popper’s rationality principle in greater depth, especially vis-à-vis economic theory, but a brief account is in order here.

Popper says that the rationality principle is merely the assumption that a person will act “adequately” or sensibly, given his or her goals and the situation. The idea is that a person simply “work[s] out” what is implicit in the situation, as posited by our model (*MF*, 169). Popper’s account of the rationality principle is surprisingly and disappointingly vague, but the principle can be plausibly interpreted as a very “thin” model of rationality. No prespecified general aims or goals, such as wealth or power maximization or even happiness, are assigned to actors prior to the situation; nor, apparently, does Popper assume that agents always act instrumentally (that is, in a means-to-end fashion). Norm- or tradition-guided behavior can also be construed as rational (or so I shall argue on Popper’s behalf in chapter 4). Similarly, there is no presumption that persons will act in a strictly self-interested or egoistic manner. As such, nearly all the

explanatory power of situational analysis lies in the situation itself rather than with the rationality principle. In fact, Popper says, the rationality principle should not be viewed as “the empirical or psychological assertion that man always, or in the main, or in most cases acts rationally” (*MF*, 169). Instead, it should be viewed as “the methodological postulate that we should pack or cram our whole theoretical effort, our whole explanatory theory, into an analysis of the *situation*—into the *model*” (*ibid.*; Popper’s italics).

Popper admits that the rationality principle is an “almost empty principle” (*MF*, 169). Nonetheless, it plays a central and twofold role in situational analysis. The first role is essentially the same as that played by natural laws in models of the natural world. Whereas Newton’s laws of motion and gravity could be said to animate a model of the solar system, the rationality principle animates a model of a person crossing the street. The rationality principle produces its general explanatory power by turning persons in the situational model into abstractions; they behave how “anybody” would behave in the situation. An actor’s particular psychological idiosyncrasies are not relevant, Popper says, nor are any of the actor’s beliefs, values, or goals that are not directly related to the goal that is implied by the situation (*MF*, 168). For instance, we should disregard the fact that Richard the pedestrian was humming a passage from a Verdi opera or contemplating Sanskrit texts as he crossed the road (*MF*, 168). Popper’s point is not so much that such thoughts could not affect Richard’s street crossing in any way—in fact, it is possible that in some situations they might (if, say, they distracted him). Rather, the point is that the situational model is supposed to be an abstraction, an ideal type of sorts, capable of explaining the behavior of abstract, typical persons acting in numerous structurally similar situations.

The second role of the rationality principle may be described as its “searchlight” power. Popper initially suggested the metaphor of the searchlight to describe the role that theories (or, more broadly, expectations) provide in scientific investigations and, indeed, all human knowledge (*OK*, 346). Popper claims that expectations always precede observations and are necessary to illuminate our investigation of the external world.⁶ However, following James Farr (1985; 1987), we can extend the metaphor of the searchlight to describe the rationality principle’s ability to illuminate the situation that actors confront. Popper says that we “learn more” by holding fast to the rationality principle (*MF*, 177). By retaining the presumption that actors behave rationally, even in the face of *prima facie* irrationalities, the rationality principle helps illuminate aspects of the situation that might have otherwise remained obscure. That is, we are led to explore dimensions of the situation that might explain why the person engaged in the apparently irrational behavior. Often new facts about the situation will be discovered that show the actor’s behavior was, in fact, rational. Understanding a person’s actions, then, becomes an exercise in developing a detailed description of his or her situation rather than an attempt to describe the individual’s psychological state. Thus situational analysis can be

described as an interpretive method as well as a method for explaining social phenomena. Popper himself characterized situational analysis this way in his later work (*OK*, 162–180; see also Farr 1983a). In particular, Popper presented situational analysis, guided by the rationality principle, as the best method for history, at least insofar as the aim of historical inquiry is to understand the actions and beliefs of individuals in history. “My thesis,” Popper writes, “is that the main aim of all historical understanding is the hypothetical reconstruction of a historical *problem-situation*” (*OK*, 170). Popper himself made occasional forays into the history of science where he employed situational analysis to enhance our understanding of, for instance, Galileo’s theory of the tides and Kepler’s metaphysics (*OK*, 170–180; *ALPS*, 74–78).

MERITS OF SITUATIONAL ANALYSIS

Much of this book will be dedicated to assessing the merits of situational analysis. As indicated in the introduction, I do not believe that situational analysis can function as the sole method for social inquiry. Nor do I think that situational analysis, as developed by Popper, is without shortcomings. That said, I think that situational analysis provides a suggestive model for social inquiry. Most importantly, it offers a way to transcend idiography—that is, mere particularistic explanations—without invoking universal laws, which, as we will see in chapter 2, are apparently not available in the social world. By constructing models of typical situations, social scientists can aspire to explain particular events as instances of typical events described by a situational model. This is not to say that situational models will resemble the overarching, powerful theories of natural science. The regularity of the regularities, so to speak, that situational models seek to describe will be limited by the extent to which people behave in typically rational or (as I will argue in chapter 6, contra Popper) typically irrational ways. Of equal importance, the regularities of the social world will be in part dependent upon social institutions, beliefs, and values. Because these undergo change—sometimes swiftly, sometimes slowly—so too will the regularities described by situational models. Thus situational models will largely remain ridden by exceptions and bound by time and culture. As such, situational models can be described as resembling the “theories of middle range” urged by Robert Merton (1967, 39–72). However, unlike those Merton describes, middle-range theories produced by situational analysis should not be thought of as placeholders for which theories of greater scope and power might one day be substituted.

Also to its credit, situational analysis is compatible with the fundamental insights of the interpretive approach to social inquiry—namely, that human action is meaningful and that any satisfactory social science must take this fact into account. In fact, as Popper himself claimed, situational analysis can be characterized as an interpretive method and as a general contribution to hermeneutics (*OK*, 178).⁷ Situational analysis conceptualizes human action as

intentional and requires that we unpack the beliefs, values, and social rules that inform an agent's behavior. Thus if our situational model is well constructed, it will advance our understanding of the situation and the individuals who inhabit it. But situational analysis also aspires to transcend the idiography and thick description of interpretive social inquiry by constructing models of *typical* situations capable of unveiling similarities of logic underlying a variety of social phenomena. For social science, these models will chiefly be institutional models, such as models of parliamentary structures or bureaucracies. Such models will never produce precise predictions, but the best of them might produce tolerable retrodictions and help us with the practical problems involved in building institutions.

Another strength of situational analysis is that it reminds us to incorporate the physical environment into our situational models. Often the effects of the physical environment will be of little importance compared with the social environment, but in some cases reconstruction of the physical realm will prove crucial. Indeed, in some cases reconstructing the physical environment faced by an agent will help us understand his or her social environment better. As Noretta Koertge has argued, situational analysis helps to break down the dichotomy between material and ideological explanation by revealing that both approaches are subsets of situational explanation (Koertge 1985, 130–131).

Finally, situational analysis need not be used solely for the construction of models of typical social situations. Popper also sees situational analysis as the principle method for explaining particular social events—that is, as the method of history (*OK*, 186–190). As with the construction of situational models, Popper recommends that we ignore psychological factors and assume that the actions of a historical figure are guided by the rationality principle. Rather than a real person who holds particular and specific theories about the world animating a particular historical situation, an abstract typical person with abstract typical aims and beliefs animates a typical situation.⁸

AGAINST PSYCHOLOGISM AND CONSPIRACY THEORIES

To fully understand Popper's situational analysis, it will be helpful to contrast it with what Popper viewed as competing but flawed approaches to social inquiry—psychologism and conspiracy theories of society.

PSYCHOLOGISM

Popper offers the rationality principle as a superior substitute for what he labels “psychologism.” Psychologism, a view that Popper ascribes to John Stuart Mill and unnamed others, is the belief that social behavior and social institutions are ultimately “reducible to the psychological laws of ‘human nature’” (*OSE II*, 89). According to proponents of psychologism, the proper aim of

social science should be to uncover such laws of human behavior and then use them to explain complex social phenomena—in the same way that, say, astronomers use the laws of physics to explain celestial phenomena. Proponents of psychologism, Popper says, would seek to animate a situational model with laws of human psychology rather than the rationality principle. That is, when trying to determine what a person would do in a specific situation, instead of asking what would be rational for the person to do, the doctrine of psychologism says that we should determine what behavior the laws of human psychology would dictate. Presumably, such laws would be uncovered through social and psychological experiments or by surveying historical and social data. Popper also compares psychologism to “behavioristic” approaches to social explanation (*OSE II*, 90).

In chapter 14 of *The Open Society*, Popper mounts a concerted attack on psychologism, arguing that it is both philosophically dubious and impossible in practice. His primary objection to psychologism is grounded in his claim that human actions can never be explained by citing psychological motives only; a complete explanation will always include reference to the situation faced by the human actors, especially the social components of the situation (*OSE II*, 90). To illustrate this point, Popper asks us to consider a person seeking to buy a consumer good (*OSE II*, 96). A certain set of psychological facts about the person—say, his *desire* to purchase a television or his *belief* that this particular model is the best—might motivate the person to buy the television. However, those same psychological facts might produce different social effects if the situation facing the person were different. In one circumstance, his purchase of the television might contribute to a rise in the price for televisions (by increasing demand for the product). But in another market situation, his action might lower the price of television, (say, by making its mass production more profitable). Whether the person’s actions decrease or increase the price of the good is dependent upon a host of situational factors—such as the number of televisions available or the number of buyers appearing on the market—that are clearly not reducible to psychological facts about individuals. Popper’s point is that mere reference to a person’s desires and beliefs will seldom be sufficient to explain all social phenomena. One must also make reference to the social situation that they confront. In this sense, social inquiry cannot be reduced to psychology.

Popper says advocates of psychologism generally concede that social explanations must make reference to the social environment, but they claim that the *formation* of human institutions can, at least in principle, be explained solely by human psychology. Thus strict adherence to psychologism forces one to trace the formation of social institutions back to the origin of society, where presumably psychological drives and dispositions were free of social influence. From that vantage, one could supposedly show how the laws of human psychology produced social institutions. Popper shows that Mill himself realized that social institutions affect human behavior and that therefore he was led to

the conclusion that an explanation of human behavior and social phenomena that relied solely on psychological descriptions would have to begin with human society's beginning. But this would be an impossible task, Popper claims, for at least two reasons.

First, humans—or what later evolved into *Homo sapiens*—were social before they were human. Thus in order for such a reduction to be possible even in principle, a presocial “man” would have had to exist prior to society. But this is a historical myth, of course; prehuman primates and their societies evolved together for millions of years before *Homo sapiens* arrived on the scene. Second, even granting that a presocial man once existed, it would still be impossible in practice to reconstruct the course of history and, in particular, the development of social institutions, owing to the incredible complexity of the exercise and to our vast ignorance of the subject. Mill himself was quite aware of this latter problem, as he makes plain in an observation from Book VI of his *System of Logic*:

I do not think any one will contend that it would have been possible, setting out from the principles of human nature and from the general circumstances of the position of our species to determine *a priori* the order in which human development must take place, and to predict, consequently, the general facts of history up to the present time. After the first few terms of the series, the influence exercised over each generation by the generations which preceded it becomes . . . more and more preponderant over all other influence. . . . So long a series of actions and reactions between Circumstance and Man [i.e., human nature], each successive term being composed of an ever greater number and variety of parts, could not possibly be computed by human faculties from the elementary laws which produce it. (1987/1872, 104–105)

Simply put, after “the first few terms of the series,” the social environment would become the dominant influence on human behavior (*OSE II*, 91–93). Popper agrees, but goes on to claim that human nature itself—which he defines in terms of “hopes, fears, and ambitions”—is largely a by-product of social institutions, and as such, he says, it would make more sense to try to reduce human psychology to its social roots rather than the other way around (*OSE II*, 93–94).

Popper further argues that psychologism fails to appreciate the fact that many, perhaps most, of our social institutions are not consciously designed. They are, rather, the unintended—and often unwanted—by-products of human actions. He compares social institutions to animal paths cut through a dense forest (*OK*, 117). Such paths usually arise without any creature's intention; rather, they emerge over time as one animal after another follows the tracks laid down by others before it. The same is often the case with human-made paths, too. Of course, in one sense, such paths are the product of human intention, insofar as they result from individuals' intentions to pass through the forest. But, in most cases, nobody ever intended to create the path as such. Further,

once the path emerges, it creates its own set of constraints and problems that affect human behavior and even human aims. Similarly, most social institutions are the product of a slow accretion of countless human actions. The institution of the “free market,” for instance, emerged in Europe over hundreds of years, beginning perhaps with small exchanges of goods between traveling salesmen and local nobility at medieval fairs. Over time, tariffs between local principalities and fiefdoms were relaxed or eliminated, the notion of a “just price” gradually gave way to the notion of a fair market price, standards and norms of bookkeeping emerged, and so on (Heilbroner 1954, 18–41). No one ever intended to create such a market; it simply emerged as the aggregate result of countless individual acts over many centuries. In fact, there was a lag between emergence of the institution and full consciousness of it as an institution.

CONSPIRACY THEORIES OF SOCIETY

In addition, not only are institutions rarely the product of human design, but the same also holds true for most social events and phenomena, such as wars, recessions, poverty, and unemployment. Popper calls the belief that the social world is the result of human design the “conspiracy theory of society” (*OSE II*, 94–95; *CR*, 123–124). This belief entails the view that history is largely the product of powerful individuals—capitalists, aristocrats, and politicians—manipulating the world for their own interests. But attempting to explain social phenomena by uncovering conspiracies is the very opposite of good social science, Popper claims. Owing to the immense complexity and general unpredictability of the social realm, attempts by the powerful to manipulate it—especially covert attempts—will usually come to naught, or even backfire. This being the case, the aim of social inquiry should not be to show how individuals with various aims achieve their goals; rather, the “main task” of social science should be to uncover the unintended consequences of human action or to lay bare the “less obvious dependencies with the social sphere” or the “unintended social repercussions of intentional human actions” (*OSE II*, 94–95). In fact, Popper contends, to the extent that human action produces its desired effect, there is no problem for social science to study.

Popper claims that the conspiracy theory of society is widely held but he seems to view it as mainly a “folk” or vulgar theory of society rather than an influential view among serious social theorists. However, though the conspiracy theory is generally false and enjoys little respect among informed social observers, to understand and explain much political phenomena it is important to acknowledge that many political actors in history have subscribed to the conspiracy theory and acted to counter it. Hitler, Popper says, tried to thwart the (nonexistent) conspiracy of the Learned Elders of Zion. “Vulgar Marxists” effectively adhere to a conspiracy theory of society—for instance, they hold that the impoverishment of the working class is the

result of a conspiracy by capitalists. But, Popper claims, Marx himself held no such view. Marx believed that capitalist and worker alike were caught up in social situation that resulted in such phenomena as overproduction of goods, declining wages, and economic depressions that nobody intended. In fact, Popper cites Marx as an early and forceful critic of the conspiracy theory of society (*CR*, 125 n. 3).

METHODOLOGICAL INDIVIDUALISM

Understanding Popper's opposition to psychologism proves key to illuminating an important but somewhat confusing aspect of his philosophy of social science—namely, his embrace of methodological individualism (*OSE II*, 98, 323 n. 11). Popper tells us that psychologism shares with methodological individualism a “sane opposition to collectivism and holism” (*OSE II*, 91). That is, psychologism “rightly insists that the ‘behavior’ and the ‘actions’ of collectives, such as states or social groups, must be reduced to the behavior and to the actions of human individuals” (*ibid.*). So, having just declared “the autonomy of sociology” and rejected reductionistic psychologism, Popper now tells us that we must “reduce” the behavior of collective entities to that of individuals. At first glance, this injunction might seem to contradict Popper's rejection of psychologism. But the following analysis will show, I hope, that there is no contradiction here.

Popper's support for methodological individualism is a well-known feature of his philosophy and dates back to his earliest writings on social science. With the possible exception of J. W. N. Watkins, whose work drew largely on Popper, Popper is cited as an authority on methodological individualism perhaps more frequently than any other thinker. Indeed, in scholarly essays on methodological individualism, it is practically *de rigueur* to begin with a nod to Popper's contributions to the topic (see, for instance, Lukes 1994, 451; Miller 1985, 459; Little 1998, 25 n. 1). However, despite Popper's emphatic, even impassioned support for methodological individualism, the version of the doctrine that he supported is actually rather trivial and perhaps should not even be considered a form of methodological individualism at all. In fact, Popper wrote surprisingly little about methodological individualism *per se*; instead, he devoted much more ink to describing what he saw as its methodological rivals—psychologism and an approach he dubbed “methodological collectivism.” As such, deciphering Popper's understanding of methodological individualism is largely an exercise in discerning what it is not. That said, we can begin our examination of Popper's understanding of methodological individualism by considering the few and scattered places in Popper's work where he comes close to defining the term.

We have just seen that in chapter 14 of *The Open Society and Its Enemies* Popper claims that methodological individualism “insists that the ‘behavior’ and the ‘actions’ of collectives, such as states or social groups, must be reduced

to the behavior and to the actions of human individuals” (*OSE II*, 91). Later in the same chapter Popper adds that methodological individualism

lends support to the important doctrine that all social phenomena, and especially the functioning of all social institutions, should always be understood as resulting from the decisions, actions, attitudes, etc., of human individuals, and that we should never be satisfied by an explanation in terms of so-called “collectives” (states, nations, races, etc.). (*OSE II*, 98)

And in *The Poverty of Historicism*, Popper described methodological individualism as the

quite unassailable doctrine that we must try to understand all collective phenomena as due to the actions, interactions, aims, hopes, and thoughts of individual men, and due to traditions created and preserved by individual men. (*PH*, 158)

Unfortunately, these three passages represent about all that Popper offers by way of definition of methodological individualism; and there is a fair amount of ambiguity in these accounts. For instance, his claim that social phenomena should be viewed as due to the actions of individuals *does* seem “quite unassailable” if Popper is merely claiming that the actions of individuals must *somehow* figure into an explanation of a social event. So much seems self-evident, thus it is hard to imagine what doctrine Popper is implicitly attacking. But perhaps Popper is making a stronger claim. He does call for the actions of social groups to be “reduced” to those of individuals, but it is by no means clear what such a reduction would entail for Popper. However, we already know, given our previous discussion of Popper’s anti-psychologism, that Popper was adamantly opposed to attempts to reduce sociology to psychology.

To help determine just what type of reductionism Popper has in mind, it will be helpful to consider Steven Lukes’s examination of methodological individualism and reductionism in his widely cited essay on the topic (1994). We can start by noting that Popper’s account of methodological individualism at first glance seems roughly equivalent to the definition offered by Lukes. After surveying the relevant literature, Lukes defines methodological individualism as the claim that “facts about society and social phenomena are to be explained solely in terms of facts about individuals” (Lukes 1994, 452). However, just as with Popper’s definition (and as Lukes acknowledges), there is a good deal of ambiguity as to what should be permitted to count as facts about individuals.

Lukes suggests that there are at least four possible types of facts about individuals that methodological individualism can permit (*ibid.*). Type (1) facts describe humans as material objects. These sorts of facts neither refer to nor presuppose anything about human consciousness, much less anything about individuals’ social relations. Such facts would include descriptions of brain states or human genetic properties. Permitting only these sorts of facts,

an adequate explanation of some social event—say, a revolution or presidential election—would have to be reduced to facts about patterns of neural firings in individuals' brains or to facts about their DNA structure. Obviously, Type (1) facts entail an extreme reductionism. Not only do Type (1) facts bar any inclusion of facts about social relations, but they also bar descriptions of facts about human consciousness.

Type (2) facts, as defined by Lukes, are descriptions of psychological dispositions or psychological processes that presuppose human consciousness but need not require any reference to social groups or institutions. Aggression, gratification, aversion, excitement, stimulus-response, and imprinting would be included among such facts.

Type (3) facts are what we might call minimally social facts about individuals. Included in Type (3) facts would be such concepts as power, authority, cooperation, anomie, and conflict. These sorts of facts do presuppose a social context, but they do not presuppose any *particular* type of social institution. For instance, this approach might describe a person as wielding a certain amount of power without describing the particular institution wherein he or she wields that power. One could simply say that a person exercised power over a certain number of other individuals.

Finally, we arrive at the least restrictive Type (4) facts. These types of facts are maximally social because they refer to particular social institutions or groups, or to particular types of institutions or groups. Such facts might include descriptions of individuals voting, cashing checks, getting baptized, issuing an injunction, or using cash to purchase a car. These facts, in turn, respectively presuppose a democratic government, a banking system, a church, a legal system, and a monetary system. Obviously, most explanations of social phenomena, whether those of laymen or social scientists, are replete with Type (4) facts.

We are now in a better position to consider what Popper might have meant when he called for explanations of social phenomena in terms of the behavior of individuals. First, it is clear that Popper would have rejected any call for social science to be reduced to Type (1) facts. We shall see in chapter 2 that Popper, swimming against the tide of materialism, argued that it is impossible to reduce mental states to brain states. But here we can simply note that Popper's anti-psychologism would surely rule out this version of methodological individualism. He could hardly argue the impossibility of reducing sociology to psychology while at the same time advocating that sociology be reduced to biology. We should note that very few serious thinkers want to reduce social science to Type (1) facts. Even if such an approach were possible in principle—which is doubtful—the technical knowledge needed to produce such an explanation is eons away, if it will ever be attained.

It is also evident that Popper would reject the claim that in the social sciences explanations must be couched solely in terms of Type (2) facts. Again, given Popper's rejection of psychologism, his version of methodological individualism

surely cannot be interpreted to permit only such nonsociological, psychological dispositions into an explanation of a social event. As we saw above, Popper emphatically rejected Mill's claim that social events and facts can be explained by reference to "the psychology of 'human nature'" alone (*OSE II*, 90). This would surely encompass such traits as indolence or propensity toward violence, as well as more obviously socially oriented human traits.

Upon initial inspection, it appears that Popper's recommendations for social science might be compatible with explanations limited to Type (3) facts. However, these minimally social facts are still too confining for Popper's version of methodological individualism. In fact, Popper explicitly rejects the claim that social science can be reduced to these sorts of facts. He admits, for instance, that such "psychological facts" about individuals as "the craving for power" are no doubt important for the study of politics. But he adds that craving for power is "undoubtedly a social notion as well as a psychological one," by which he means that to gain a complete understanding of this craving, we would have to trace its development within the framework of some particular social institution, such as the family (*OSE II*, 97). In other words, to understand the craving for power, we would have to examine the social institutions and the socialization process that help to inculcate such psychological dispositions in an individual. Popper also says that such psychological concepts as love, ambition, and even his own notion of the "strain of civilization"—a feeling of uneasiness that Popper says is the cost of living in an open society—are both psychological *and* sociological concepts because they cannot be fully characterized without relating them to the social situation (*OSE II*, 98). So it is clear that for Popper explanation of social phenomena by means of such minimally social concepts as power and authority would require reference to specific social situations.

We are left to consider Type (4) facts, and there is no doubt that Popper permits—in fact, requires—the inclusion of these types of facts into social explanations. Popper, who dubs his approach to social inquiry "institutionalist," is quite explicit on this point (*OSE II*, 90). Institutionalists

can point out, first of all, that no action can ever be explained by motive alone; if motives (or any other psychological or behaviorists concepts) are to be used in the explanation, then they must be supplemented by a reference to the general situation, and especially to the environment. In the case of human actions, this environment is very largely of a social nature; thus our actions cannot be explained without reference to our social environment, to social institutions and to their manner of functioning. (*OSE II*, 90)

Elsewhere, Popper even goes so far as to assert that the chief goal of social inquiry should be the analysis of "abstract relations." By this he appears to mean that social scientists should analyze the rules and regulations that govern individuals' behaviors, as opposed to analyzing the actual individuals who are governed by such rules and regulations (*OSE I*, 175).

Noting that Popper called for social explanations that include references to the social situation, Lukes registers some puzzlement as to why Popper (and Watkins, too) insisted on calling his position methodological individualism (Lukes 1994, 457).⁹ And it is puzzling. If Popper permits maximally social propositions into social science's explanations, what type of social explanation is he conceivably rejecting? Surely Popper envisioned his version of methodological individualism as barring some types of explanations. The answer, I think, is that Popper's main goal in developing his account of methodological individualism was to counter what he believed to be a widespread but deeply misguided approach to social inquiry—the approach he dubbed “methodological collectivism.” This is the approach that he accused Hegel and, at times, Marx of employing.¹⁰ It entails the belief that some sort of transcendent entity or suprahistorical force can impose its will on individuals and thereby produce social phenomena. In other words, supraindividual entities are deemed to be prior to individuals in order of explanation; individuals are merely puppets to such forces. For Hegel, Popper says, this force would be the “national spirit”; for Rousseau, it would be the “general will” (*PH*, 148–149). Another holistic entity would be Reason, in the Hegelian sense, which directs the dialectical march of history. Watkins seems to have had something like Popper's methodological collectivism in mind when he attacked “*sinister*” or “*inhuman*” social explanations (Watkins 1994, 445; his italics). Watkins says that these types of explanations account for social phenomena not in terms of “human factors,” but rather in terms of “an alleged historicist law which impels people willynilly along some predetermined course” (*ibid.*). In contrast to the methodological collectivist, “the methodological individualist denies that the individual is ever frustrated, manipulated or destroyed, or borne along by irreducible sociological or historical *larvs*” (Watkins 1994, 450 n. 8).

Watkins's comments not only help elucidate Popper's discontent with methodological collectivism, but they also intimate a link between historicism—the view that the aim of social science is to predict the course of history—and methodological collectivism. Popper viewed methodological collectivism and historicism as natural allies (*PH*, 71). Historicists often posit some holistic entity—for example, the Nation or Reason—that subsumes and controls individuals and thereby determines the course of history. However, we should note that for Popper historicism need not entail methodological collectivism. Popper argued that Mill was at once an historicist and a proponent of psychologism. For Mill, it was human nature that ultimately determined history's procession rather than some holistic or suprahistorical force.

Given our analysis, how should we understand Popper's version of methodological individualism? It appears that Popper intended something like this: Explanations in social science always require a description of individuals acting within social situations. The agency of the individual can never be made subservient to the will of some holistic entity; it is ultimately the individual

that animates the social world and never the other way around. At the same time, however, the social situation cannot be reduced to facts about individuals—whether as isolated beings, psychological entities, or material properties. In fact, most of the work involved in developing a situational model will be dedicated to producing a description of the social situation. The actions of the individual, on the other hand, will be assumed to be guided by the rationality principle regardless of the situation.

THE ETHICS OF METHODOLOGICAL INDIVIDUALISM

Popper's strong opposition to methodological collectivism cannot be explained solely on methodological grounds. As noted above, Popper considered methodological individualism to be not only methodologically mandatory, but ethically mandatory as well (Stokes 1998, 80; Lukes 1994, 454). For Popper, the methodological priority of individuals was linked to the moral priority of individuals. This is a prominent theme in *The Open Society* as well as *The Poverty of Historicism* (see *OSE I*, 86–119). In both works, Popper repeatedly warned against the dangers of presuming that holistic entities such as the state or the nation have wills or interests of their own that somehow supersede or transcend those of individuals (*OSE II*, 98–99). Social science based on methodological individualism, he believed, would mitigate the danger of reifying such holistic entities. In *The Poverty of Historicism*, Popper goes so far as to claim that methodological individualism is a “democratic-individualist” approach to social investigation, whereas methodological collectivism entails a “collectivist-nationalistic” stance (*PH*, 148). Popper feared that belief in the reality of collective “spirits” would lead to injustice and suffering on the part of individuals in the name of the “interests” of states or nations or tribes. This was his moral indictment against Plato and Hegel—that they sacrificed the individual on the altar of, respectively, the city and the state. For Popper, methodological collectivism was the handmaiden to the “totalitarian justice” of Platonism and Hegelianism. As we have seen, Popper believed that social institutions and entities have a reality insofar as they influence individuals,¹¹ but he argues that it does not follow from this that institutions themselves have interests or needs or goals. Institutions exist solely for the interests and needs and goals of the people who compose them. Popper espied a methodological parallel to this point, namely that the existence as well as the behavior of collective entities—states, nations, institutions—are always dependent upon the existence and behavior of individuals. In Popper's words, we need people to “animate” social entities. But, as Popper realizes, it does not follow from this that the behavior of collective entities is *reducible* to the actions of individuals

Thus Popper tries to find a sensible middle ground with his version of methodological individualism and his attack on psychologism and methodological collectivism. Although clarifying his position is made difficult in part

by his confusing labels, for Popper, methodological collectivism is the belief that the attributes and behavior of a collective entity are prior to and independent of the attributes and behavior of individuals. One wonders if any serious thinker actually advocates such a bizarre and seemingly indefensible position. Popper's other methodological opponent—psychologism—is, at first glance, more plausible, but as Popper makes clear, it too is an untenable reductionistic strategy. It seems, then, that Popper must reject both approaches if sociology is to remain largely autonomous from psychology.

SUMMARY

The goal of this chapter has been to introduce Popper's theory of situational analysis. To bring situational analysis into sharper relief, we also considered some approaches to social science that Popper rejected—namely, psychologism and methodological collectivism—as well as one important social science doctrine that he embraced, methodological individualism. In the following chapters, we will further explore (and sometimes criticize) situational analysis by considering Popper's encounters with positivism, hermeneutics, economics, Marxism, and psychology.