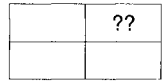
CHAPTER 7

Understanding social action



In trying to focus the problem of structure and action on M. Rouget's vote, we might have hoped that there is an agreed method of explanation in the natural sciences which could be imported into the social sciences. But there is not; and that is partly, no doubt, why it is hard to decide whether the holistic approaches deployed in Chapter 5 are undercut by the Rational Choice version of individualism proposed in Chapter 6. On the other hand, there have been signs that the social sciences may call for a scientific method of their own. The next two chapters will examine some ideas about the understanding of social action which suggest that the social world can only be tackled from within and by methods different from those suited to the natural sciences.

To clear the deck, let us start with a brisk reminder. M. Rouget took the stage in Chapter 3 as a case study in Positive science and the application of a universal scientific method to social phenomena. To explain his voting communist was to cite statistics from which his vote could have been predicted with high probability. The epistemic warrant was a principle of induction, and the scientific method was one for confirming or refuting inductive generalisations, as in Lipsey's 'percolator'. This approach to explanation has fared badly even for the natural world. A merely inductive warrant offers too little and claims too much. It offers too little because it cannot guide choice among rival theories which are all consistent with the observed facts. Nor can it ground a needed distinction between causal laws and accidental correlations. It claims too much by assuming that facts can be identified prior to all theory and interpretation, as pragmatism

pointed out sharply in Chapter 4. Meanwhile it has nothing to offer realists, whose explanations involve unobservable structures and causal mechanisms. As to that, however, the rationalism of Chapter 2, although 'very mechanical' in its way, does not satisfy today's realists and we are still owed the their epistemological warrant for inferring the structures and mechanisms which they regard as the best explanations.

The moral to be drawn is only the modest one that we can be open-minded about the analysis of social action. If the stuff and order of the social world is sufficiently unlike the natural, then causal explanation may have to yield to interpretative understanding. Even so, there may still be room for compromise and collaboration. But that can wait.

We are now under the aegis of the hermeneutic or interpretative tradition in social theory and its governing imperative that the social world must be understood from within. In its full splendour it is a very grand tradition, with as strong a sense of the underlying movement of history as rationalists or realists have ever had of the hidden order of nature. In this aspect it is often termed 'historicist' and its tutelary genius is Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831). Hegel remains a central figure in current social theory, having survived Marx's famous claim to have stood him back on his feet by establishing dialectical materialism and Popper's attempted refutation of both of them as pseudoscience in *The Poverty of Historicism* (1960). But the grand ambitions of historicism cannot be conveyed briefly and they obscure some clear and simple reasons for deeming the social sciences peculiar. So, as in Chapter 1 (p.17), I open the case for an interpretative approach to the social realm with Dilthey's remark that 'meaning' is 'the category which is peculiar to life and to the historical world'.

We shall begin by noting four ways in which meaning or meanings may be peculiar and by connecting the topic with the philosophical problem of Other Minds. Attention will then focus on the concept of rationality, here introduced with the help of Max Weber. A different approach to understanding will next be sought in Wittgensteinian ideas about social action as the following of rules and the playing of 'games'. Since this sense of 'game'

contrasts radically with that of Game Theory, we can then play *homo economicus* off against *homo sociologicus*, using a version of the latter which, on the whole, belongs in the top right box. Attempts to give social actors more autonomy will be left to the next chapter.

FOUR KINDS OF MEANING

What might be peculiar about meaning as a category or about meanings as examples? Here are four possible preliminary answers with no obvious parallel in physics and little parallel in biology.

Firstly, human actions have meaning. They embody intentions, express emotions, are done for reasons and are influenced by ideas about value. The agent means something by them. This is (usually) possible only because there is a conscious stock of meanings to draw upon. There are conventions and symbols which others can be expected to recognise. Even if animal behaviour, being often purposive, displays feelings and is directed to goals, it does not draw on a conscious stock of conventions and symbols. Although a ring round the moon 'means' rain, it does so only in the sense that it is correlated, perhaps causally, with rain. Spontaneous tears, a natural sign of grief, are not to be confused with symbols of grief, for instance when a flag flown at half mast means that a death is being mourned.

Secondly, this distinction between the meaning of an action and what the actor means by it relates to one between what words mean and what people mean by them. Language is a prime candidate for the key to the peculiarity of social life. Indeed one recent line of thought holds that all social actions and interactions should be regarded as a 'text' and construed as if they were utterances. The connections among action, thought and language are at least intimate, and it can be argued that all private thought and individual action presuppose a shared language, thus making language more than an instrument to serve human purposes. None of this applies to the behaviour of atoms. It may perhaps apply to the squirrels in my garden warning each other that a cat is stalking them, or to the mating song of the

whale, or to the bees' honey dance; and chimpanzees can apparently be taught words by humans. But, if so, this does more to show that some animals have a rudimentary social life than that the conceptual complexities of human language are at the other end of a continuum which starts with physical atoms.

Thirdly, unlike animal habits, human practices are imbued with normative expectations (to be distinguished presently from the game theorist's rational expectations). They embody ideas about what one is entitled to expect of people and are reinforced by guilt and shame in the face of reproach for failure to live up to them. Underlying the expectations specific to a particular role there is usually a broader ethics or, often, a set of religious beliefs, which extend the seen world into an unseen world of values, ideals and sacred beings. I word this carefully so that, in making it matter what meaning people find in their lives and performances, we are not committing ourselves to an unseen world and an external meaning which life has. But, even when worded neutrally, there is a moral dimension to social life which a 'moral science' will need to capture. A scientific method designed for physics and adapted to biology may be radically unsuited to deal with it.

Fourthly, although my cat may hold beliefs, for instance that there is food to be had by leading me to the cupboard where it is kept, she does not hold theories about the nature of things. We do. In particular, we hold theories about human beings which are influenced by the social sciences. Freudian psychology, for example, has shaped many people's self-understanding. Game Theory, as noted earlier, has affected the conduct of foreign policy by decision-makers convinced of the merits of Game Theory. The meaning of many actions depends on the model of the social world which is in the actors' heads. This curious feature of social theories, that they are, so to speak, tied to their own tails, will prove important later.

THE PROBLEM OF OTHER MINDS

These four suggestions involve several senses of 'meaning' and are, I confess, pretty miscellaneous. I shall try to harness them

in a moment by reflecting further on the notion of rationality. But first we should identify a philosophical problem which they all raise. The core epistemological problem so far has been the problem of Knowledge: by what criterion do we know that a belief is true or at least that we are justified in holding it? This question has ramified into others about the faculties of mind, the character of the natural order, the difference between science and pseudoscience and the relation of theory to experience. But its core remains one about inference from narrow premises to wider conclusions, especially when those conclusions refer to unobservables. In so far as 'meaning' is indeed the category peculiar to the social sciences, the problem of Knowledge gets an acute twist – the problem of Other Minds.

The four suggestions distinguish, in effect, between behaviour and action, between signs and symbols, between signals and utterances, between habits and practices, between regularities and norms, in short between natural adaptive responses to a changing environment and self-conscious, theoretically-informed social interaction. The first term in each pair sets the previous epistemological puzzles of inference and interpretation. These puzzles also apply to the second term in each pair but there is then a further twist. To arrive at the meaning of actions and utterances, we need the actors' interpretations. If it takes interpretation of data to know that one sees a human body with its arm in the air, it takes a second interpretation to know that the body is someone waving goodbye. The problem, premised on the separateness of persons, is how one mind can know what is in the mind of another. This is the philosophers' problem of Other Minds. It becomes central for the social sciences as soon as one thinks of understanding action as involving an interpretation of an interpretation, a 'double hermeneutic', as it is commonly called. Among its instances is one crucial for anthropology, that of Other Cultures, which arises when we ask how members of one culture (or sub-culture) can penetrate the inwardness of another.

As a revealing gloss on the problem, think about the difference between a spectator and an agent. An astronomer is a spectator, watching what happens in the distant heavens and explaining the behaviour of this law-governed realm. Reports may start in the

first person ('*I* see Venus here and now') but reference to a personal point of view soon drops out. In general, natural science aims at a spectator's view and any retreat from it, made for reasons in the earlier chapters, is reluctant. The basic presumption remains stubbornly that nature is independent of human belief: one cannot keep dry by refusing to believe that it is raining. If naturalism is right, the social scientist aims at a spectator's view too, whatever the complications arising because humans are agents and social actors: the spectator can see at least as much of the game as the players. Yes, adherents of the hermeneutic tradition reply, but only if one first reconstructs the players' point of view and that radically changes the character of the exercise; there is a fundamental difference between understanding and explaining, since what happens in the social world depends on its meaning for the agents in a way without parallel in the realm of the stars. In these terms the problem of Other Minds becomes radically peculiar to social science, instead of a mere complication within the problem of Knowledge.

RATIONALITY: A WEBERIAN APPROACH

That is only a rough gloss, however, and we need some precise way to distinguish between explaining and understanding. Even if 'meaning' is a suggestive category, I do not myself find it a helpful one. There are too many senses of meaning which might be relevant, thus making it too hard to decide what account scientific explanation can or cannot take of meanings. A better idea to work with, I find, is that of rationality. It is easier to analyse and serves better to focus disputes both between explaining and understanding and between holistic and individualistic understanding. This is not an original thought. It occurred notably to Max Weber (1864–1920) and we cannot do better than start with his analysis of social action and how to understand it.

'The science of society attempts the interpretative understanding of social action,' Weber declared in the opening pages of *Economy and Society* (published in 1922), the classic source for the Weberian distinction between explaining (*erklären*) and understanding (*verstehen*). In 'action' he includes 'all human action

when and in so far as the acting individual attaches subjective meaning to it'. By 'social action' he means action 'which takes account of the behaviour of others and is thereby oriented in its course'. For example, he says, cyclists engage in social action when entering traffic, whereas people who put up umbrellas in the rain do not. For, although umbrellas are social objects and a crowd of umbrellas may indicate a social event, there is no social action involved in putting up an umbrella, at least in so far as each person takes account only of the weather.

Notice that Weber's starting point is an individualist one. He begins with individual actors who attach subjective meaning to their actions. ('Subjective meaning', in Weber's usage, covers whatever emotions, ideas, aims or values an action can embody or express.) Then he introduces social action as an interplay considered from the point of view of each individual, a move well suited to our earlier games with rational agents. This starting point will be challenged later in the chapter but, meanwhile, it conveniently lets us pick out two aspects of the meaning of action or utterance which obtruded earlier. There is its subjective meaning (what the actor meant by it) and its intersubjective meaning (what the action meant). Cyclists cannot orient their behaviour in its course unless they can rely on a shared reading of signals given and received. There is a question, analytically, of whether the individual intentions are prior to the shared reading, as Weber implies, or whether the intentions are possible only because there are public 'rules of the game'. But, either way, interpretative understanding needs to reckon with both.

Weber then specifies four pure types of action, the first two of which are to be understood by reconstructing the agent's reasons. The first is instrumentally rational (*zweckrational*) action, where the agent chooses the most effective means to an end. This is the 'economic' type of rationality implicit in the orthodox microeconomics and idealised in Expected Utility Theory, the instrumental rationality assumed throughout our previous chapter. The second is value-rational (*wertrational*) action, where the goal or value pursued is so important to the actor that it drives out all weighing of costs and consequences. Acts of sheer heroism and self-sacrifice are examples, as are, more broadly, acts done from duty or some

other moral principle. The third pure type of action is 'traditional' action, typical of traditional, norm-bound societies and to be understood by identifying the relevant norms. Weber defines it as 'the expression of settled custom' and remarks dismissively that it is standardly 'simply a dull reaction to accustomed stimuli'. Fourthly there is 'affective' action, where the agent is prompted by a simple, unreflective desire, for instance to drink a glass of water because thirsty.

These are pure or ideal types of action, whereas most everyday actions, Weber says, are of mixed type. But the ideal types need to be distinguished because they require different kinds of understanding. *Zweckrational* action is to be understood by reconstructing the calculation of expected utility which went into it: why Jack's choice of apples rather than pears was rational, given his preferences, information and resources. As in the previous chapter, the type is 'ideal' not only because it abstracts from all but 'economic' considerations but also because it abstracts to an ideally rational agent. Understanding proceeds by identifying the ideally correct solution to the agent's problem of choice and then applying it as a yardstick. If Jack has indeed made the rational choice, then the reconstruction tells us how he arrived at it. If not, then the reconstruction identifies what needs further explanation, namely the agent's failure to act rationally. To understand, for instance, why a general orders a regiment to advance in a battle, we first work out whether that was his best decision. This may seem a surprising detour in what sounded like a descriptive method but Weber is definite about it and it bears on questions of whether Rational Choice and Game Theories are at fault, if social actors do not act consistently with them.

Wertrational action is to be understood by identifying its overriding goal or value, and traditional action by identifying the custom to which it conformed. Here it is harder to see what Weber has in mind and we should first take note of two stages in understanding. He says that understanding starts with empathy or *direktes Verstehen*, which is like perception. By empathy we know (without inference) that a man swinging an axe is cutting wood or that a marksman is aiming a rifle. In other words there is a basic

process of social observation in which the data are actions, not physical objects and behaviour from which actions are inferred. Then there is explanatory understanding or *erklärendes Verstehen* by which we come to know that the cutter of wood is earning a living as a wood-cutter or that the marksman is out for revenge. Explanatory understanding is a matter of assigning an action to 'a complex of meanings'. It can be done 'historically', where we identify a specific motive, for instance that the marksman is aiming to kill his brother's murderer; or 'sociologically', where we identify a common phenomenon like a vendetta and understand the particular case as an example; or 'ideal-typically', where we analyse the action with the aid of an ideal type, as in the 'economic' rational-choice case above.

There are other ideal types besides the economic, however. There are also conceptual ideal types which take a concept like 'feudal', 'patrimonial', 'charismatic' or 'bureaucratic' and analyse the pure form of the social relationships involved. Best known perhaps is Weber's analysis of bureaucracy as an organisation where order is secured by the following of rules within a hierarchical structure whose effective goal is the maintenance of its own procedures. What makes this type ideal is not only its purity but also the orderliness it discerns in or imposes on apparently irrational phenomena. Then there are 'average types' of the sort found in the use of statistics where we are averaging 'differences of degree among qualitatively similar kinds of behaviour'. The idea here, I think, is that what is picked out as typical in theory needs to be shown to be empirically significant too. Thus whether we have understood why M. Rouget votes communist depends both on the theoretical sense to be made of his vote and on his being an 'average' communist voter by some statistical reckoning.

Weber's approach is a suggestive but uneasy blend of elements, each of which, taken separately, bears plausibly on the analysis of rational action, but which, taken together, leave it obscure where we are. Clearest is the claim made for an instrumental notion of rationality (*Zweckrationalität*) for purposes of understanding 'economic' action by reference to what an ideally rational agent would choose. Recent developments in Rational Choice theory and Game Theory have given this line on social action immense

power, as we have seen. But Weber's 'acting individual' is not solely *homo economicus*. Even in the modern world where 'rational–legal' arrangements have replaced 'traditional' ones, *homo sociologicus* is firmly present, most typically perhaps in the role of the bureaucrat. This individual is a rule-follower in an organisation whose structure of rules gives order to his world and his place in it. In some moods Weber sees these structures as denials of reason and in others as bulwarks of rational order in a decaying civilisation. At any rate they are a major element in social action and one which makes us think further about the relation of rational action to rules. That is partly why Weber's 'explanatory understanding' becomes so complicated, we shall find. Meanwhile there is some suggestion that, whereas for *homo economicus* to be rational is to calculate, for *homo sociologicus* to be rational is to follow a rule. Let us next pursue this thought.

SOCIAL ACTION AS RULE-FOLLOWING

The hermeneutic imperative is to understand social action from within. 'From within what?' we might ask. The stock individualist reply is: 'from within the mind of each acting individual'. An alternative reply is: 'from within the rules which give it meaning'. These replies both sound right, in echo of our earlier distinction between what an action means and what an actor means by it. For instance, if one asks how winking (action) differs from blinking (reflex movement), the answer needs to refer both to social conventions which make winks a vehicle for information, hints, reservations, conspiracies, warnings or bidding at auctions, and to the actor's intention to perform one of these speech-acts rather than another. For language especially, it seems luminously plain that to understand an utterance we must know both what it means and what the utterer means by it. But different senses of meaning appear to be involved. When my German friend says '*Dieser Hund ist gefährlich*', his words mean 'This dog is dangerous' and he no doubt means to warn me to keep away from it. One is inclined to comment that what makes the utterance rational is his wish and intention to warn me, rather than the fact that it conforms to the rules of German sentence construction for applying

the predicate 'dangerous' to dogs. But the connection between rationality and rule-following may be much more intimate.

This is a good moment to introduce Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* (1953) with its fertile analogy between languages and games. To say 'This dog is dangerous' is to make a move in a game of communication, rather as to play *P-K4* is to make a move in a game of chess. A visiting Martian, seeing a human being shift a small piece of wood a small distance on a squared surface, would not know that a pawn had been moved. To recognise a pawn as a pawn the visitor needs to grasp the rules and point of the activity. Without its rules, indeed, there would be no such activity as chess and no pawns to move. Similarly, 'This dog is dangerous' is mere noise, unless it is an instance of rules applied in a situation. Rules of language define a 'game' which would not exist without them.

A game like chess is not a device or instrument with an external purpose, which makes sense of how the game is played. For, even if it has some loose aim like amusement, that does not account for its particular form. Moves within a game of chess have only purposes which derive from the rules. Jill plays *P-K4* because, standardly, it is the best move, she believes, in that position, where 'best' refers to her prospects of winning, as specified in the clauses spelling out checkmate. This is not to deny that moves can sometimes be made for extraneous reasons, as when she deliberately plays badly against a beginner needing encouragement or against the vain dictator of a banana republic. But such occasions presuppose standard ones, and she will fail in her purpose if she is not convincing. Similarly, although there are non-standard games with chess pieces, like 'losing chess' where the aim is to have all one's pieces captured, there is always the question of whether these are variants of the standard game or not chess at all. The core of the game consists of rules, which set the scope and limits of what can be understood about occasions of play from within.

To be precise, the rules of chess (or any other game) are of two sorts, constitutive and regulative. Constitutive rules create the game by defining its purposes, its legitimate moves and the powers of its pieces. Without such rules there is no game, rather

as one might say that there is no language without some rules of grammar. Regulative rules then govern choice among the legitimate moves. They range from rules of thumb, like 'Castle early', to rules of etiquette, like 'Don't fidget'. The distinction is not always clear but the difference is roughly that, if one breaks regulative rules, one is not playing the game well or appropriately, whereas, if one breaks the constitutive rules, one is not playing it at all. Ambiguity about borderlines is often useful to theorists and players alike and certainly does not imply that there is no vital difference.

In learning the rules of a game, one is learning 'how to go on', in Wittgenstein's pithy phrase, how to do what is required, to avoid what is forbidden and to pick one's way through what is permitted in the spirit of the game. Chess is both a good and a bad example for purposes of understanding social life by analogy with games. It illustrates well the internal and constructed character of meaningful activity and the internal nature of reasons for particular moves. But it is misleading, if it suggests that social activities have complete and consistent rules, covering all eventualities. Diplomacy, for instance, is interestingly game-like in some ways. Diplomatic manoeuvres and signals need to be interpreted with a knowledge of the conventions and an awareness that diplomats expect one another to share this knowledge. But the conventions are open-ended and the purpose of diplomacy is not served merely by passing the platitudes at cocktail parties. The aims of the diplomatic game are external to it, even if they are not external to all the games which nations play. The analogy is instructive but limited.

Similarly, the law is certainly game-like not only in its reliance on conventions but especially if one thinks of it as partly constructed through the work of courts. Courts decide whether there has been a breach of the law. Sometimes this is a straightforward matter of fact: was Jack elsewhere and therefore innocent of strangling Jill? Sometimes it turns on the interpretation of agreed facts: Jack admits killing Jill but denies that he murdered her. Sometimes the interpretation of the law is at issue: if Jill is senile and dying of cancer and Jack is her doctor, is he culpable if he fails to treat her pneumonia? These latter questions of

interpretation are akin to asking whether someone has broken the rules of a game, where it is less than clear what exactly the rules imply on a particular occasion. To understand what happens in courts, we need to understand the practice of law, the rules of the legal game, in depth.

On the other hand, we may think that there is also more to it. This could be simply a matter of relating legal practice to other practices and institutions, for instance to law-making bodies, like Parliament. To understand moves in one game, we must often understand other games too. But we might also want to step back altogether. Some legal theorists argue that the process of law makes sense only as the pursuit of justice, rather as the process of science makes sense only as a search after the truth about nature. Here the meaning of the game would be external to the rules of the game, because the rules are subject to the external test of whether they are just. An unjust law is to be condemned, whatever the institutional authority for it. Theorists who believe in 'natural law' take this view, in opposition to legal positivists, who deny that there can be any such external standpoint. That raises a question of relativism, or the scope and limits of understanding from within, which will crop up later.

Meanwhile there could also be more to law than the legal game for a different sort of reason. One might argue that the process of law makes final sense only in relation to the distribution of power in a society. In echo of Marx's distinction between base and superstructure, cited in Chapter 1, one could hold that a society has the legal norms which its material conditions demand. In that case the meaning of the game could be deemed to be external not because of moral considerations but for the sort of structural and functional reasons sketched in Chapter 5. Either way, the analogy between legal processes and games would be instructive up to a point but not the whole story.

Social theorists impressed by Wittgenstein may nonetheless insist that the analogy does indicate the whole story. There is something mesmeric about his lapidary remark that 'What has to be accepted, the given, is, so to say, *forms of life*' (1953, II.226). The suggestion is that particular actions belong to particular practices, which are embedded within the wider practices which

go to make up a culture. To understand a particular action or practice fully, we may need to grasp the wider context and see how broad collective ideas of what matters for the proper conduct of life contribute to the sense of how to go on particular occasions. But the story is, in the end, self-contained. It rests finally with 'forms of life', which have to be accepted as given, because there is nothing further to account for them. Notice the use of the plural. There is no single 'form of life' in terms of which lesser forms make sense, not even one for each culture and still less one universal form of all cultures. The plural is a reprise of Wittgenstein's earlier comment that there is nothing which all games have in common:

> Don't say: There *must* be something common, or they would not be called 'games' – but *look and see* whether there is anything common to all. For if you look at them you will not see something that is common to *all*, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that. (1953, I.66)

There is nothing more unitary than a complex network of similarities, overlapping and criss-crossing, but characterised as 'family resemblance'. Just try finding more of a common core, he adds, to 'board-games, card-games, Olympic games and so on'.

One philosopher inspired by this theme is Peter Winch, whose (1958) book *The Idea of a Social Science* puts it to striking use. Winch opens by denying that science can proceed by testing theories and hypotheses against the facts of an independent world so as to find causal explanations of how the world works. We must not presume that reality is independent of thought or that to understand reality is to explain its workings causally. On the contrary, 'our idea of what belongs to the realm of reality is given for us in the concepts which we use' (1958, p.15). These concepts come complete with criteria for deciding the truth of statements describing a realm of reality, for instance those employed by physicists in talking about the behaviour of particles or by witchdoctors in identifying signs of witchcraft. Groups of concepts are the cognitive aspects of institutions and each institution therefore embodies ideas of what is real and how it is to be understood. Thus, 'connected with the realisation that intelligibility takes many

and varied forms is the realisation that reality has no key' (p.102). Science embodies the key to the reality of a world of particles; religion embodies the key to the reality of a spiritual world. It is scientific practice to seek causes and religious practice to seek meaning. These practices, each being peculiar to its own form of life, are not in competition, since reality has no external or universal key.

Institutions, cognitively speaking, embody ideas. But, as with Kuhn's paradigms, they are also constituted by social relationships and rules. This, however, is not to anchor them externally. 'Social relations are expressions of ideas about reality' (p.23). 'All behaviour which is meaningful is *eo ipso* rule-governed' (p.52). To understand the activities of monks, for instance, we must see the daily life of the monastery as an expression of rules which give meaning to their relationships. Thus the three knots on the end of the rope which some monks wear signify vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. The vows make sense of the knots and the ideas of a spiritual reality embodied in the monastic order make sense of the vows. What is true of monks is true of everyone else too, with due allowance for varied ideas, varied rules and varied forms of life.

The implications for method in the social sciences are striking. It is no good basing our understanding of societies on the methods of the natural sciences, Winch holds. 'The central concepts which belong to our understanding of social life are incompatible with concepts central to the activity of scientific prediction' (p.94). Prediction and causal explanation are indeed proper activities for natural sciences, since that form of life includes ideas of reality which make them appropriate rules of method. But natural science is a 'game', and only one game among others. Other social games embody other ideas; and a social scientist must understand each from within and in its own terms, by finding the varied rules which diverse groups of actors follow. Presumably the sociology of science is a higher-order game, one which involves studying the game of explanation so as to understand the activities of its players.

All this, when summarised so starkly, is very strong stuff. It seems to allow no appeal beyond forms of life, neither to an

external reality which some or all forms of life seek to make sense of nor to independent criteria of what it is rational to believe or do. That makes it sternly idealistic – there are only 'games' expressing ideas – and sharply relativistic, in that diverse forms of life are self-contained and closed to external criticism. Moreover, human beings appear to feature only as social actors, players of games who do all and only what they take the rules to require of them. The monk, with his highly structured life, is all mankind's epitome. Since *The Idea of a Social Science* is a short book which sets out to apply and explore a possible reading of Wittgenstein, and since his other work, especially on action and ethics, is much more nuanced, I would not want to saddle Winch himself with these views untrammelled. Nevertheless the themes just cited are boldly stated in *The Idea of a Social Science* and will serve nicely as a way of filling in our top right box. A stark summary yields an ideal-type account of institutions as embodiments of collective meanings which readily invites holistic understanding, as Figure 7.1 points out crisply.

RULES AND RATIONALITY

We have found that meaning, Dilthey's 'category which is peculiar to life and to the historical world', can be glossed as rationality in, broadly, two ways. Both ways are prompted by the reflection that 'meaning' is an elusive term with many uses and the subject of several conflicting theories of meaning. Both therefore connect meaning to what makes action intelligible, namely the fact that it

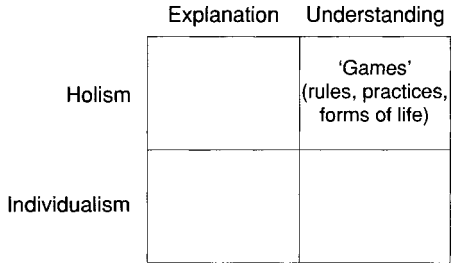


Figure 7.1

is (usually) rational from the agent's point of view. They then diverge over how to analyse 'rational'.

The simpler and clearer analysis adopts Weber's ideal-type of economically rational action, where the agent is an individual *homo economicus* equipped with desires (preferences), beliefs (information) and an internal computer, who seeks the most effective means to satisfy his desires (or maximise his expected utility). Analysis proceeds by identifying those elements and reconstructing the agent's deliberations so as to display the action as instrumentally rational. That leaves a question of what to do about irrational action. But, if we follow Weber in stressing subjective meanings and are liberal with interpretative charity, most or even all actions will come out as subjectively rational from the agent's point of view.

This gloss hardly seems to help the thesis that Understanding differs from Explanation, however. Although it nods to the hermeneutic imperative to understand action from within, it does so merely by being willing to play up the subjective elements in what seems to remain the topic of the previous chapter. Most game theorists see themselves as providing tools for causal explanations of action and will be inclined to say that Weber has merely muddied the water by discussing instrumental rationality (*Zweckrationalität*) under the heading of Understanding. Although there are reasons to think this view mistaken, they have yet to emerge; and, since *homo economicus* has been a pretty mechanical agent so far, I think that he is more comfortable so far in the bottom left box of Figure 7.1.

That is not to say, however, that the previous chapter had a cogent account of social norms. Those which could plausibly be said to emerge as mutually useful solutions to problems of coordination did indeed look like conventions, in the sense of regularities which it is safe to bet on. But others, which headed off mutually self-defeating choices only by injecting obligations or other backward-looking reasons into interactions, remained stubbornly resistant. Tucking them away in the agent's given preferences did nothing to tame them. On the contrary, the need for this ruse strengthened the case for a *homo sociologicus* distinct from or even prior to *homo economicus*.

Accordingly, the other way of glossing meaning as rationality sets social action firmly within a context of norms, rules, practices and institutions. So pervasive is this context that it is at least tempting to think of the agents not only as social actors before they are individuals but also as plural before they are singular. In other words it is tempting to contrast a *homo economicus* who belongs in the bottom left box of Figure 7.1 with a *homo sociologicus* whose primary home is in the top right box, where norms, rules, practices and institutions give a notion of social structure suited to the 'Understanding' column. That threatens to conceive of social actors so as to make them creatures of this new and softer kind of structure. But that may not be the upshot, if we are no longer thinking causally about the relation of rules to actions which fall under a rule. Postponing for the moment the question of whether 'creature' is the right word, we can next usefully contrast Wittgensteinian 'games' both with the individualistic games of Game Theory and with the causal structures suited to holistic explanation.

A 'game', construed with help from Wittgenstein, is a normative structure, external to each of its players. Yet, in contrast to the external structures or systems envisaged in the top left box under the heading of 'Explanation', games are internal to the players collectively. They are external to each but internal to all – intersubjective rather than objective, one might say. Games, we might readily suppose, are historically and culturally specific, with a real enough power to set the terms in which people think and relate but only in their own place and time. If so, it would not be surprising to find only overlapping and criss-crossing resemblances among the games of social life and no universal features which all normative structures have in common. An ontology whose primary elements are intersubjective contrasts both with an ontology with objective wholes, independent of human consciousness, and with one whose primary elements are subjectively motivated, individual actions.

Methodologically, the intersubjective route to understanding is to identify the constitutive and regulative rules of the relevant 'game' (institution, practice, 'form of life'), exhibit the associated normative expectations and thus understand action as the doing

of what is normatively expected in a situation structured by the rules.

Epistemologically, the crux is whether this approach embodies a solution to the problem of Other Minds. In effect, we have blended Weber's value-rational (*wertrational*) action, performed regardless of consequences, with his 'traditional' action ('the expression of settled custom'). If action is indeed made intelligible by reconstructing it in this way, we can know what is in other minds by identifying their customary rules and shared meanings. That sounds plausible. But it has been worked out in this chapter by making the rules of the game all-important and the players wholly their obedient followers. That is contestable, we shall shortly see.

CONCLUSION

We began the chapter with four peculiarities of meaning, which have no obvious parallel in physics and little in biology, and a suggestion that the problem of Other Minds is central to the social sciences. To check how clearly we have managed to contrast explaining with understanding, let us return to the opening peculiarities.

Firstly, actions have meaning. There is a contrast between natural signs, as when a ring round the moon 'means' rain, and conventional symbols, like a flag at half mast. Natural signs and their underlying causes are the stuff of scientific explanation and squarely a topic for the earlier chapters. This is not to deny that some questions about scientific ideas invite us to recognise that science, like religion, is an attempt to make sense of experience in ways involving symbolic kinds of meaning. Nor is it to deny that some human and social behaviour lends itself to scientific explanation. Hence there will be much to think about in Chapter 9, when we come to relate Explanation and Understanding. Meanwhile actions have two peculiar sorts of meaning: what they mean in so far as they are signals taken from a common stock of conventions; and what the actor means or intends by them. To understand action we need a line on Other Minds which allows the reconstruction of both. Will Wittgensteinian reflections on the playing of games suffice?

Secondly, language has meaning. This obvious truth helps to sharpen the last point, since language is often seen as the key to understanding how thought informs action. It is certainly seen in this light by Wittgensteinians, and anyone who pursues the references to *Philosophical Investigations* will find that 'language games' are the subtlest and deepest illustration of the general theme about rules. Understanding what people think and do is not only *like* understanding the uses of language but can even be equated with understanding how words mean what they do, if one construes 'language' so as to garner the insights offered by phrases like 'the language of mathematics', 'the language of art' or 'the language of politics'. Moreover the obvious truth that there are many languages carries a suggestion, which we may or may not wish to resist, that there are many games, many ways of thinking and many forms of life, each constituted by its own rules, just as languages have their own rules. It is as if all action were a text to be read by understanding the rules of the language in which it is written. How far does this take us?

Thirdly, practices have meaning. The previous paragraph stressed the meaning of words rather than what people mean by their words. This begs the question against theories of language which analyse utterance into a mutual recognition, between speaker and hearer, of what the speaker intended to convey. In that individualist kind of analysis, linguistic conventions emerge as an aid to individuals and, in general, individual thought is prior to the linguistic vehicle of its expression. Practices similarly emerge as convenient solutions to individual problems. Wittgensteinians work the other way round, with the existence of practices as a precondition for individual actions which rely on them. Practices, construed communally in this way, are not merely habitual regularities of behaviour. They embody shared values and give rise to normative expectations, couched in a moral language of praise for fulfilling them and blame for failure. By enriching the notion of a game so as to stress its normative texture, we can propose a sense of structure appropriate for the 'Understanding' column. Does that dispose of Rational Choice individualism, the presumption that action is prior to convention and hence to practices?

Fourthly, there is the complex point that social actors have models of the world and of themselves in their minds. Furthermore they credit one another with such models. Weber defined social action as action 'which takes account of the behaviour of others and is thereby oriented in its course'. The 'account' taken soon becomes very sophisticated. Even unreflective people are players of games where they constantly need to know what others want and believe and which require mutual recognition of subtle normative expectations. Among the factors influencing these 'models', consciously or unconsciously, are the models of social action put in circulation by social scientists. This suggests disconcertingly that whether an account of social action offered by social science is correct may depend partly on whether it is believed. Although it is prudent to postpone this dizzying thought, it certainly gives the social scientist one headache which natural scientists are spared.