

COMMENT ON JON ELSTER'S PAPER

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I must begin by stating that I found Elster's paper very difficult to pull together, perhaps mainly because its simple language and illustrations belie the complexity of his thinking. Elster offers us two explanations of or approaches to understanding human behaviour or action. Common to both approaches is the concept of human motivations. Human beings act or behave because they are motivated to do so, and two interrelated explanations account for this. The first is that human motivations exist in a continuum starting from visceral impulses at one extreme to rational behaviour 'unperturbed by visceral factors' on the other. However, even within this domain of impulses, Elster posits that:

There are instances where impulses as a trigger to human action may overshadow any other considerations:

There are instances, especially in complex cases, where visceral factors or impulses might counteract one another and

There is a relativity in the intensity or strengths of impulses to the costs envisaged in pursuing the acts they determine, and in such instances a costs-benefits analysis mediates between impulses or visceral factors and the behaviour to be pursued.

Rational choice on the other hand, is governed by factors such as the weight of each behavioural action under consideration (costs, the energy to be expended and consequences anticipated), consistency i.e. the likelihood of repeating the same behaviour over time and the intrinsic value of such behaviour.

Finally, between the extremes in the visceral – rational continuum there are actions that are motivated partly by visceral factors and partly sensitive to rational factors or to the costs – benefits analysis.

The second approach, still operating within the domain of motivation, is that human behaviour or action can best be understood from the opera-

tions of three precursors or determinants. These are interest, passion and reason corresponding to the Freudian ego, the id and the superego. The superego, corresponding to reason, checks the impulses of the id. The id, which corresponds to passion, instigates or triggers action; and the ego, which corresponds to interest, negotiates between the two.

From these two approaches, it is apparent that Elster's thesis of human behaviour offers a post behavioural explanation or analysis whereupon we may explain the behaviour or action from motives but not necessarily predict its course or finality. We can tell what motivated the behaviour in question post facto, but not predict, from the parameters, what the behaviour will be. We can not, for instance, tell with certainty which of the parameters will be in operation at a given time although given the circumstances and perhaps the temperament of the individual, we can predict the probability of a specific course of action from a range of possible alternatives. This takes us into the domain of culture and I shall comment on this in the sections below.

There are three definitive propositions in Elster's paper. The first is that human behaviour is motivated by forces or drives which operate within stated parameters. Although these parameters are stated they do not operate in a straight forward mode as they have shades of meanings giving rise to different types of action. Take, for instance, the distinction between wanting and wishing both which fall within the domain of emotions. In the former the subject is engaged in direct action while in the latter the subject is interested in the outcome and may not do anything to bring it about. The same problematic exists in the categorisation of intrinsic and instrumental motivation for action. As predictive tools they present enormous problems in analysis.

The second proposition is that these parameters operate within socially constructed values which give rise to social norms and standards. It is these norms and standards that determine, influence or shape the way in which the stated parameters or determinants express themselves. For instance, given the same interests, individuals from different cultures will express themselves differently on the same issue. Freely expressing cultures will allow members of the masculine sex to weep openly in instances of bereavement whereas stoic cultures reserve this expression to members of the fairer sex. Some African cultures permit levirate i.e. taking over a dead brother's wife and find the practice rational on the grounds that it keeps the lineage intact whilst Christian cultures define the practice as incest. We can, however, not tell with certainty if the widow will accept advances from the late husband's brother or if he will develop an interest in her.

The question of values, which are functions or products of a culture adds yet another complicated dimension to the equation. Given a number of pos-

sible values we are not certain of a specific value operating at a given time. In the example of taking over a dead brother's wife values such as economic considerations, emotional feelings towards the widow, fear of competition, on the part of the widow should the brother in law be married and vice-versa may influence the ensuing action or behaviour. We would have to find out, from the subjects themselves, what influenced their behaviour. Predicting it would present great difficulties. Elster's thesis becomes more ambiguous to apply both as a predictive and as an explanatory instrument or framework as the behaviour becomes more complicated and the alternatives also become complex. There are instances when both motives and cultural (normative or ethical) considerations weigh equally on the decision to act or not to act in a practical way. The domino effect as a factor in impulse control is a case in point. Individuals may refrain from the expected action both from the eternal domino effect and from moral considerations. This renders the thesis ambiguous. For instance, probable modifications such as Kant's bigger pipes or bringing dinner forward in order to drink earlier are such examples of behavioural modifications which may be interpreted as a negation of the thesis on the one hand and yet fall within the visceral desire, prudential concern domain on the other. Whatever the label, the ambiguity is not easy to resolve.

The third proposition is that the relationship between motives and action is not linear. The movement is not directly from motive to action, but may entail other alternatives including digressions, retreats and even a change of action. This is a phenomenon which Elster resolves by the statement the 'interest and passion', notably often show a certain deference to reason. This deference may be expressed by 'sweeping the conflict under the carpet' or by modifying the behaviour or action originally envisaged, or by complete withdrawal.

In conclusion Elster offers very interesting framework for explaining behaviour but not necessarily a theory of human behaviour. The critique that I have presented is not a criticism of his framework as a theory of human behaviour. He did not venture it as that in the first instance. The critique is, therefore, an attempt to demonstrate problems in the efforts made at explaining and predicting human behaviour as the variables involved are too many and too complex at any given time.