Purpose and Necessity in Social Theory

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Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

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The Analysis of Social Theories

For the purposes of this study, the term social thought is construed in a broad sense, but one that is by no means all-inclusive. It is limited by the fact that I am exclusively concerned with Western thought, and within Western thought I deal only with the modern period, which I arbitrarily assume to have been inaugurated by Hobbes. Even so, the materials relevant for such a study would seem to exceed manageable bounds. They include not only the writings of political philosophers and philosophers of history but also the works of those who laid the foundations for all of the specialties which we now classify among the social sciences. To analyze this range of materials in detail would, of course, be a hopeless task.

On the other hand, one can often quite clearly see that theories which arise in different fields of social inquiry may be based on common presuppositions, and even opposed theories within a given field may have some presuppositions in common. The task of analyzing social thought, as I conceive it, involves uncovering the presuppositions that are present in the approach which all social theorists, whatever their fields, bring to bear on the concrete materials with which they work. Thus, it is with the analysis of those presuppositions common to a wide variety of social theories, and not with the analyses of these theories themselves, that I am concerned.

It may, I think, be taken for granted that however restricted the scope of a social theorist’s investigations may be, the task he originally sets himself and the methods he follows will reveal certain basic
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documented presuppositions. It is with them that I am concerned. To be sure, it has sometimes been claimed that the normative presuppositions which a thinker brings to his work are no less important for understanding that work than are his theoretical presuppositions. While I do not deny that this is often true, I doubt that such a claim is universally applicable. Furthermore, even when true, no matter how strongly a theorist may be motivated by normative beliefs, his theoretical presuppositions will constitute a significant aspect of his work. Of course, the work of every social theorist will be affected not only by his basic theoretical and normative presuppositions but also by a host of personal factors, such as his training, his relations to both his contemporaries and his predecessors, and the social or political experiences which he has undergone. I shall not be concerned with these more specific differences among different social theories, but only with some very basic presuppositions with respect to which these theories agree or disagree. Such presuppositions tend to fall into pairs of polar opposites. For the sake of convenience, I shall speak of such pairs as categories. Purpose and necessity are the categories with which this book as a whole is concerned. In the present chapter, however, I wish to single out another pair of categories which has special importance in all social theorizing and is also directly relevant to some of the problems we shall later encounter with respect to the roles played by purpose and by necessity in social change.

Currently, this first pair of categories is most often referred to in terms of an opposition between "methodological individualism" and "holism." This formulation, as I have elsewhere argued, is somewhat misleading, since not all who reject "methodological individualism" accept what is labeled as "holism." A more accurate characterization of this pair of approaches would be to contrast those social theories which are based on individualistic presuppositions with those which adopt an institutional approach. This is the terminology I shall use. To be sure, any social theory has to include reference both to individuals and to institutions, and to the relations between them; nevertheless, some theories have attempted to understand social institutions in terms of the basic character and needs of individuals, whereas others have rejected this approach, attempting to understand the nature of a society through a direct examination of its institutions and their relationships to one another.

The opposition between individualistic and institutional approaches has been reflected in social thought in many indirect ways. For example, debates concerning the invariance or variability of standards of value have often been affected by it: those accepting an
individualistic approach have usually tended to hold that at least some basic values are universal and invariant, whereas those emphasizing institutional approaches have usually held that all values are historically conditioned and vary over time. The contrast between individualistic and institutional approaches is also sometimes reflected in other ways—for example, in arguments concerning the roles of “nature” and “nurture” in forming the character of individuals. Important as such contrasting views have been in the history of social thought, there is a significant difference between them and the categories of individualism and institutionalism with which I am presently concerned. This difference lies in the fact that the opposition between individualism and institutionalism is a methodological issue, whatever its further implications may be; on the other hand, questions concerning nature versus nurture and questions concerning the variability of values are primarily substantive; as such, views concerning them have been subject to radical change as new information or beliefs have affected the debate.

When we later come to examine the opposition between the categories of purpose and necessity, we shall see that they, too, have involved substantive issues, rather than being primarily methodological; we shall therefore be forced to trace how their uses have varied. In this connection we shall see that in some of their forms purposiveness and necessity were not regarded as being in all ways opposed, and in such cases we shall have to disentangle their actual relationships. On the other hand, even though individualism and institutionalism have been interpreted in different ways at different times, the contrast between theories which are built on a conception of the nature of individuals and those which approach society in institutional terms has been a remarkably persistent phenomenon in the history of social thought. In fact, one might say that there has been a tendency for the balance between these approaches to shift first toward one side and then the other in pendulum-like fashion. This I regard as unfortunate, since neither approach, taken by itself, is adequate to deal with all of the types of problems with which any general social theory must be concerned.

At the beginning of the modern period the individualistic approach was dominant, and the manner in which it was applied to phenomena reflected the analytic method of the new science of mechanics. Complex social phenomena were assumed to be the results
of the constant action of a set of simple underlying forces which governed the behavior of individuals. Late in the eighteenth century, when the balance shifted, it was held that social life could not be understood through postulates concerning a set of unchanging factors regarding the motivation of individuals, but must be approached in historical terms. That which was "historical" was identified with that which was concrete and actual in social life, varying according to time and place, with each society having its own characteristic nature and value. What was held to give each society its unique character, binding the lives of individuals into an organic whole, were the history and traditions of that society.2

The most characteristic and striking examples of a conflict between analytic models of explanation based on individualistic assumptions and an institutional emphasis on historical wholes is to be found in the development of modern political theory. In the seventeenth century, and through much of the eighteenth, no claim was made that analyses of the nature and basis of the state had any direct reference to actual, well-authenticated historical events. In fact, those who used the analytical approach attempted to look beyond the differences between societies, seeking to reveal characteristics which were both constant and universal. On the other hand, in the late eighteenth century, there was a self-conscious rebellion against this approach, and in its place there arose an institutional approach, claiming to be historical, which emphasized diversity in the character of different societies.

Those who had followed a nonhistorical approach, attempting to uncover the common features underlying all societies, might have proceeded in a number of different ways, but one obvious way—one that has had a persisting influence on all forms of social thought—was based on the presupposition that societies are to be regarded as aggregates of individual human beings who, knowingly or unknowingly, weave the fabric of social life through each individual's pursuit of his own good. Consequently, in such theories one finds that the explanations of social phenomena are formulated in psychological terms.

The political philosophy of Hobbes provides an unusually clear example of four basic presuppositions characteristic of such an approach. First, he believed that wholes are aggregates of self-existing parts, and that the behavior of a whole is determined by the behavior of its parts. Second, he applied this doctrine to society, viewing a society as composed of individuals whose natures were what they were independently of the society to which they belonged. Third, he
regarded human nature as both uniform and constant, not varying from individual to individual, nor according to time or place. Fourth, he assumed that this common human nature was ultimately simple, with every action of every individual derived from a single basic motive, or from some few such motives, each of which was universally shared. These presuppositions were not peculiar to Hobbes, but were characteristic of the thought of most of the major political theorists during the succeeding hundred years; the same presuppositions provided the foundation upon which classical eighteenth-century economic theory rested. They came to be challenged in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by various thinkers, such as Herder and Hegel, as well as Burke and de Maistre, who differed on many issues but each of whom rejected the previous view. Each denied that wholes are to be understood as aggregates of self-existing parts, that the character of individuals is independent of the societies to which they belong, and that all motivation can be reduced to a single universal principle, such as utility.

The rejection of a Hobbesian approach was part of a widespread rebellion against analytic modes of thought in all fields, and against the mechanical view of nature with which those modes of thought were associated. Analogies drawn from mechanics no longer furnished models for understanding how societies function; instead, social phenomena were more often described in terms of biological metaphors. This involved a radical transformation in social thought. The new view was diametrically opposed to a Hobbesian approach in claiming that within any genuine whole, such as a living organism, every part is what it is, and functions as it does, only because of the nature of the whole to which it belongs. When applied to social life this view undermined the conviction that an adequate social theory must have at its foundation an understanding of the individual; instead, it was held that individuals can be understood only when reference is made to the culture of the societies to which they belong and in whose life they share. Furthermore, each culture came to be viewed as if it itself were a living form, distinct from other cultures and variable over time; there could therefore be no constant and universal set of motives which would lead all individuals, everywhere, to pursue identical goals. In addition, a new view of the dominant forces in history became prominent. Instead of regarding cultural and social change as being due primarily to the initiative of particular individuals, or to advancing individual enlightenment, these theories viewed the spirit of a people, formed through a common language and customs and molded by a common historical tra-
dition, as defining the strength of a culture and determining that which it achieved or failed to achieve.

Later, owing to intellectual changes taking place in a variety of fields, the contrast between individualistic and institutional approaches came to be formulated in other terms, and I shall shortly examine some of these later developments. First, however, I wish to show that both the individualistic and the institutional models, as originally formulated, were extremely vulnerable to criticism. I shall start with the difficulties to be found in the form of analysis which, for brevity's sake, I have identified with a Hobbesian approach.

In opposition to a Hobbesian approach, I shall contend that whatever may be true of other wholes, the elements which together form a society are not parts which are separable, even in principle. This is a point easily overlooked, since the existence of a society presupposes the existence and activities of the individuals living in that society, and since the life of an individual, once he or she has been born and has survived infancy, will in most cases continue independently of the life of any other specific individual. It is therefore tempting to treat these individuals as isolable units and to analyze the ways in which societies function by appealing to the ways in which individuals, taken singly, are expected to behave. Consequently, it has been widely assumed—and not only by Hobbes—that social phenomena are to be explained in terms of whatever psychological principles govern the actions of individuals. This type of position has a distinct appeal to what passes for a realistic, "commonsense" approach, since in explaining the nature and functioning of societies it does not postulate the existence of any such shadowy entities as the spirit of a people, nor treat institutions as entities as real as, or more real than, individuals.

There are, however, strong reasons for rejecting such a view, as I have elsewhere attempted to demonstrate. In the present context I shall confine my formulation of this criticism to one point to which I have not previously called attention. It is simply this. To conceive of a society as a group of individuals would be misleading if one did not take into account the specific ways in which this group of individuals interact. Therefore, in identifying a society with the behavior of individuals, one should—at a minimum—hold that the society is characterized by the nature of the interactions among individuals in that society; one should not equate it with these individuals themselves. Yet, even this manner of speaking would be misleading if it were taken to mean that all of the interactions among individuals who live in a society constitute features which are to be attributed to that
society. The error in doing so becomes evident as soon as one realizes that only certain shared patterns of interaction among individuals serve to define the features of a society, distinguishing it from other societies; many other interactions among individuals are simply the ways in which these particular individuals, given their individual temperaments, their personal histories, and the situations in which they find themselves, happen to respond to one another. In short, the characteristics on the basis of which societies are to be identified are various patterns of learned behavior to which persons occupying different positions in a society, and playing different roles in its activities, are expected to conform. It is these normative patterns themselves, and not the individuals who behave in accordance with them, that must be taken into account when one wishes to describe the nature of a society and what constitute its essential parts. However, those who have searched for what have been called “rock-bottom” explanation in the social sciences have held that it is only in terms of individual behavior that the nature and functioning of a society can be understood. In short, they mistakenly treat social organization as a by-product of individual behavior, not as a major determinant of it.

This introduces a second misleading aspect of a Hobbesian type of approach. It has been widely assumed, and not only by Hobbes (the name of Bentham springs to mind), that if social phenomena are to be explained in terms of individual behavior, the basis for such explanations is to be found in one or more universal and unchanging characteristics of human nature. That assumption has most often been challenged on the ground that there are no such characteristics, but my objections to it lie elsewhere. I reject it because any explanation of the nature and functioning of an actually existing society cannot be concerned solely with whatever characteristics may be common to all persons. Of themselves, such characteristics could not explain the very different forms of behavior expected of individuals living in different societies. Consider, for example, the problem of male and female roles. Although every society draws some distinction regarding the sorts of behavior that are to be expected of males and of females in different types of situation, just what forms of behavior are appropriate for each varies greatly from society to society. Given this variability, the existence of distinctions between male roles and female roles cannot be explained in terms of whatever particular traits might be common to all males or to all females; a fortiori, such distinctions could not be explained in terms of traits possessed by all human beings. Similarly, in every society different roles are assigned to the young and to their elders, but these roles vary from
society to society, and no traits of either the young or the old can serve to define their roles in different societies. In short, because individual behavior is always influenced by the social structure in which it takes place, the actual behavior of individuals in different societies cannot be explained solely by a theory that appeals to what is universal in human nature. It is only on the basis of historical explanations, rather than relying on what is universal in human nature, that such differences can be explained. In this respect a historical approach is superior to the purely analytic approach with which we have so far been concerned.

To be sure, it is possible for a social theory to combine a historical with a psychological approach, as one can see in the case of several political theories which developed out of, or in connection with, eighteenth-century associationist psychologies. Hume, for example, criticized the ahistorical character of social contract theories; nevertheless, there were two respects in which his own explanation of the origin and basis of civil societies resembled the individualistic approach of such exponents of a purely analytic method as Hobbes and Spinoza. In the first place, like them, Hume appealed to psychological principles which he held to be universal and constant. In the second place, he—like his fellow associationists Hartley and Adam Smith—believed that the basic conditions of human existence were at all times fundamentally similar, and that the universal principles of human nature therefore always tended to produce similar social consequences. Thus, in spite of his rejection of the theory of a social contract, Hume did not abandon the prevailing assumption that all societies resemble one another with respect to their fundamental principles of organization.

Other associationists, however, broke that tradition, emphasizing the extent to which societies differ because of differences that had developed in their institutions. Helvétius was one primary source for this emphasis on historical diversity; he, like John Stuart Mill and the reformers Godwin and Owen, held that through the association of ideas, human nature itself was capable of taking on new characteristics: that it had done so in the past and could be made to do so in the future. Yet, this did not involve the rejection of an individualistic approach to social theory: associationists continued to insist that social phenomena are in all cases to be explained in terms of the underlying principles of individual psychology. Furthermore, even though they recognized that there is no one pattern of institutional organization to which all societies conform, they did not abandon the belief that there is a single normative standard, derived from
what is universal in human nature, in terms of which all social goals are to be measured. Thus, even when they introduced a historical dimension into their theories, none of the associationist school broke with the main individualistic presuppositions of those who had previously followed an analytic approach.

In this respect, as in many others, Rousseau was a harbinger of change. Symptomatic of the shift that was about to take place was the contrast between his position and that to which Hume had subscribed. With respect to history Hume had confidently held that mankind are so much the same, in all times and places, that history informs us of nothing new or strange in this particular. Its chief use is only to discover the constant and universal principles of human nature by showing men in all varieties of circumstances and situations.4

Rousseau, on the other hand, had said that there is, from people to people, a prodigious diversity of morals, manners, temperaments, and characters. Man is one; I admit it! But man modified by religions, governments, laws, customs, prejudices, and climates becomes so different from himself that one ought not to seek among us for what is good for men in general, but only what is good for them in this time or that country.5

In spite of a challenge such as this to the ideal of normative constancy, and in spite of his doctrine's rejection of much of the individualism of earlier theories, Rousseau's approach in his Social Contract was not in the least historical. It was only after metaphors of growth and development, drawn from the organic world, began to dominate philosophic and social thought that all traces of the analytic approach were abandoned.

Because of the stress which came to be laid on organic analogies, each nation and period came to be viewed as a living whole, all aspects of which shared a common life. While Rousseau's vision of an ideal semipastoral society had this characteristic, he denied its presence in all other forms of social life. For Herder and Hegel, on the other hand, each nation or people had its own essential unity, which developed out of an indwelling principle and was capable of being understood only if one turned away from abstractions regarding what was true of all men and approached each culture in terms of its own traditions and values. This was not only the position of Herder and Hegel, but was equally true of the views of Burke and de Maistre.
While there was no unanimity among these late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century thinkers with respect to the specific principles of interpretation to which they appealed, there was at least one element they had in common: their emphasis on the spirit of a people or of an age. This aspect of their thought was also shared by subsequent thinkers such as Savigny and Ranke, whose works had an even greater direct influence on political and social thought.

Although historical studies were enlarged by this new approach, and in general benefited from it, serious difficulties arose whenever the notion of the spirit of a people, or of an age, was used as a means of explaining the character of specific institutions. Even when it was interpreted in a merely descriptive manner, it was often misleading, since those who used it tended to assume that all the activities and institutions which effectively shape political and social life are informed by, and dominated by, a single principle or spirit. At the time, such a view was attractive because it was widely held that intellectual analysis threatens the destruction of all that is unique and valuable in human life. Nevertheless, some forms of analysis must be employed if a historian is to offer concrete descriptions of the society or period with which he is concerned. One cannot deal with the spirit of a people or of an age except through understanding the various activities, institutions, and works of art through which that spirit manifests itself. This descent into historical detail cannot be carried out by a simple act of intuition; it demands that what is taken as representative of the spirit be separated out from that which is less truly representative of it, and from that which has been left over from the past. Thus, even those who suppose that there is a dominant unity of spirit in a people, or in an age, cannot treat a culture as if it were a single indivisible whole.

Furthermore, anyone who holds that each people, or each great age, manifests its own unique spirit must be in a position to compare various cultures, showing in what ways their specific institutions and laws, their works of art, their philosophies and religions, differ, for it is in these forms of life that the so-called spirit of a people or of an age is expressed. In order to be in a position to make such comparisons, a historian must focus attention on first one and then another facet of the life of the societies with which he is concerned: it is not through a single, simple, intuitive act that the spirit of a people or of an age can be grasped and compared with the characters of other peoples and ages. Only an exaggerated rhetoric, brought about by a reaction against preceding modes of thought, had led these late-eighteenth- and nineteenth-century social theorists to suppose that every
form of analysis must be avoided if an understanding of what is essential in history is to be attained.

Turning to Comte and Marx, we find that they were as anti-individualistic in their views of society as were Herder or Hegel, Burke or de Maistre. Furthermore, they too emphasized the underlying unity to be found in each society. However, what they attempted to do was to analyze societies in institutional terms, establishing universally applicable laws concerning the structure of societies and the causes of social change. In this, they differed completely from those who had held that the unity of social life springs from a common spirit which animates a people or an age.\(^6\)

One reason why this difference has been overlooked has been that the most basic law to which Comte appealed was his law of three stages: namely, that all sciences and all societies undergo a necessary transition from a theological stage through a metaphysical stage, to emerge at a positive, scientific stage. Because of his emphasis on there being a law of development, Comte’s position seemed to resemble Hegel’s philosophy of history, according to which history unfolded in a necessary linear pattern, with each stage representing a higher and more self-conscious form of freedom in its inner life. Marx can also be interpreted in a similar manner, though he need not be. When so interpreted, what is emphasized is his summation of history as revealing a pattern of development in which a primitive form of communism is transformed in Asiatic society, passes through slave societies to feudal society, and then gives way to capitalism, which, in its advanced stages, will eventually be replaced by a free communist society. Whenever this aspect of Marx’s views is emphasized, it would seem that the law through which he sought to explain society was a law of development: that he regarded the history of human society as a single whole which exemplified a pattern of necessary change. Yet it is possible to interpret Marx’s theory in a fundamentally different way. According to that interpretation, what is basic in any society are the productive forces (roughly, the land, labor, and technology) underlying its total economic system, and its economic system provides a substructure that determines the nature of all other institutional factors present within the society. On this interpretation, Marx does not hold that history is to be viewed as unfolding according to a necessary law of development; on the contrary, he would be claiming that the great periods of human history developed as they did because of the operation of the particular economic forces which his analyses of economic processes had revealed. As to
Comte, while his general theory had placed primary emphasis on the law of three stages, he also analyzed the interrelationships among the institutions which were simultaneously present in a society: thus, he was by no means exclusively occupied with interpreting societies in terms of a single, unanalyzable law of directional change.

Basic to their attempts to establish a science of society, was both Comte's and Marx's assumption that what had occurred in the history of social life had occurred necessarily. Although, as we have noted, Hegel's position was radically different from theirs, he too viewed the historical process as governed by necessity. Because of this, critics have sometimes tended to underestimate the differences in their views, attributing to each of them the same doctrine of historical inevitability. However, the concept of necessity can be applied in different ways, and since it was also central in the thought of other nineteenth-century social theorists, such as Buckle, Taine, and Spencer, it will be important for what follows that we untangle some of the main ways in which that concept was used.

In this connection there are two distinctions which are crucial, and the first of them was already implicit in what has been said concerning the alternative interpretations which might be offered regarding Marx's view of history. On the first interpretation Marx held that there is a necessary law of development that defines the stages through which human history inevitably passes. Interpreting Marx in this way, one would say that he believed there to be an ultimate law of development concerning the stages of social change. Whether or not this is the most adequate way of interpreting Marx, it is assuredly the usual and most obvious way of interpreting Comte's historical sociology, and it is the way in which one must indubitably interpret Hegel's philosophy of history. On the other hand, according to the second interpretation of Marx, the element of necessity is present in history only because there are necessary connections among certain factors present in any social system: if the productive forces in society never changed, the society itself would not change in any of its important structural characteristics; or if changes in the productive forces occurred but did not occur in a uniform manner, the pattern of change in other institutions would also be non-uniform. It should then be obvious that the concept of "necessity," as used by Marx, would have different applications according to which of these two interpretations of his theory one adopts. On the first interpretation, the necessity obtains with respect to a sequence of stages through which the history of societies passes: it is a develop-
mental necessity. On the second interpretation, what is regarded as necessary are the interrelationships among specific factors within a society: the changes in direction which the society as a whole undergoes will depend upon changes in the most fundamental of these causal factors. In that case, unlike the first case, the flow of social history would not inevitably move in any particular direction. Thus, it is possible to claim that there may be necessary connections in history without embracing a doctrine of historical inevitability. I shall return to this distinction, and its importance, in a later chapter.

The second point at which different applications of the concept of necessity has caused confusion in discussions of social theory relates to the problem of whether the actions of individuals are free or determined. I shall also discuss this problem in a subsequent chapter; at present I am concerned only to show that it has no direct relevance to the question of whether an individualistic or an institutional approach should be adopted in social theory. To be sure, it may at first glance seem that if one could attribute free will to individuals, this would undermine an institutional approach, and that is an argument that has sometimes been used. It is, however, an argument without merit, since even though it may be true that most institutionalists have been determinists insofar as the individual is concerned, there is nothing in an institutional approach which necessarily commits them to that position. This follows from the fact that if social organization and change are not to be explained in terms of the actions of individuals, it will be irrelevant whether those actions were freely chosen or determined. This fact is especially apparent in the thought of those institutionalists who emphasize historical inevitability. In Hegel, for example, it is “the cunning of Reason” which leads to the fact that men’s passions achieve goals other than those which the individual envisions; this being the case, the outcome of an individual’s actions would be the same regardless of what is responsible for his pursuit of whatever ends he in fact pursues. The same lack of linkage between these problems is evident in the thought of those who adopt an individualist position. While such a position would clearly be compatible with a belief in free will, one must recall that Hobbes, Spinoza, and Hume (all of whom were individualists in their social theory) were determinists with respect to the actions of individuals. Furthermore, one may note that an individualist who accepts determinism with respect to individual action, as did Hume, need not regard the historical process as determined. Bearing all these facts in mind, it is unfortunate that questions concerning ne-
cessity and freedom should so often have intruded into discussions as to whether an individualistic or an institutional approach should be adopted in the realm of social theory.

In most of the nineteenth century the dominant approach to social theory was institutional; only the utilitarians, continuing the associationist tradition, attempted to explain the characteristics of organized social life on the basis of psychology. While two new movements in the latter part of the century did much to revive an individualistic approach, they did so independently of, and largely in opposition to, the fundamental principles of the associationists. One of these movements seized upon the Darwinian theory and emphasized the instinctivist basis of human behavior, whereas the other represented the revival of an idealist conception of the nature of individuals. While these latter forms of individualism in social theory were in most respects antagonistic, their combined influence eventually helped to undermine the necessitarian forms of institutionalism which were then dominant.

Their success in doing so was by no means immediate. For example, Buckle in England and Taine in France had considerable influence through their attempts to analyze the causes which underlay the differences between societies. Furthermore, independently of evolutionary theory in biology, interest came to be focused on the evolution of social institutions. While such an approach had its roots in some earlier doctrines of progress, the attempt to trace evolutionary change in specific institutions, rather than to offer a general philosophy of history, was initiated by legal historians such as Maine, Bachofen, and McLennan, and was expanded in the theories of cultural evolution propounded by Tylor and Morgan, as well as in Spencer's sociology. Unlike Darwin, their contemporary, these men were not concerned to establish that there was a continuity between animal and human life with respect to bodily form and mental traits; rather, they directed their primary attention to the evolutionary development of such specifically human features of social life as religion, law, and systems of marriage and descent. While there was a tendency among them to look on social evolution as following a regular path of development, only Spencer attempted to explain this development in terms of a definite law governing all forms of change. The others—and most of their contemporaries—did not view human history as following a course defined by an underlying law of change; rather, they regarded it as expressive of the tendency of the human race to progress through growth in man's material culture, his skills, and his
knowledge. Even though they stressed this growth in human accomplishments as the basis for what they regarded as the general course of history, these theories adopted an institutional rather than an individualistic approach, for it was on the basis of the cultural heritage of the race, and not in terms of the character and actions of individuals, that they explained social organization and change.

On the other hand, Darwin’s approach to social theory was distinctly individualistic, not institutional. His view of animal behavior, with its emphasis on the role of instincts, deeply affected the way in which he interpreted human behavior: in *The Descent of Man* his account of social behavior was based on instincts which were present in both animals and men. With reference to this theory, it is to be noted that even though he often mentioned an instinct of self-preservation, the instincts to which he turned when explaining the basis of social life were what he termed “the social instincts.” While he did not offer a list of such instincts, in the fourth chapter of the *Descent of Man* one finds mention of “parental and filial affection” and “love and sympathy for one’s fellows,” and even a tendency in man “to be a faithful to his comrades and obedient to the leader of his tribe.” Darwin held that these social instincts were also present to some degree in animals, and accounted for their social behavior. But this by no means exhausts the characteristics, such as intelligence, tool-making ability, and the ability to communicate, which Darwin believed men had in common with animals: and these, too, were obviously relevant to the development of social life. What is important to note is that both these special abilities and the social instincts themselves were independent of the instinct of self-preservation in the individual. In fact, under some conditions, the social instincts which Darwin mentions may work against the preservation of the life of the individual. Unfortunately, Darwin himself did not face this fact, often listing the instinct of self-preservation along with other, more specialized instincts, and this helps explain why his account of social behavior could on the one hand lead to “social Darwinism,” where self-preservation in the struggle for survival played a dominant role, and could at the same time lead Huxley and others to infer that the correct implication to be drawn from evolutionary theory was the need for cooperative social endeavors. Darwin’s own view emphasized the utility of group cooperation for the survival of the species, and he was by no means a social Darwinist. In fact, it was the cruelty of the struggle for existence in nature that was one of the important reasons leading him to abandon his original theistic convictions. Yet, regardless of whether his theory was applied in the form of social
Darwinism, or whether cooperation was stressed, its appeal to an instinctivist basis was no less clear an example of the individualistic approach to social theory than associationism had been. Where it differed from associationism was in abandoning hedonism as its basic explanatory concept, stressing instead the hormic side of human nature.

The psychologist who later developed the most explicit and comprehensive approach to social theory on the basis of instincts was William McDougall, whose *Introduction to Social Psychology*, published in 1908, rapidly went through many editions, the sixteenth being published in 1923. It was his intention to lay the foundation for a theory of social institutions in terms of a psychology that took the inherited instincts of the individual as the basis on which these institutions developed. In a less explicit and systematized manner Freud, too, appealed to the concept of instincts and biologically based needs in his explanation of individual behavior, and he, too, used this individualistic approach in an attempt to account for social phenomena. What was stressed in his theory, however, was the way in which human instincts are inhibited, diverted, distorted, and controlled under the circumstances surrounding the individual’s development. When he later used his theory as a way of accounting for the manner in which civilization and religion developed, what he tended to stress was the effects they had on the individual’s psyche. Comparing the theories of McDougall and Freud, one is struck by the fact that in spite of the very great differences between their accounts of the factors responsible for social life, they are similar in one important respect: neither directly addressed questions concerning the differences between different societies nor attempted to account for such differences. To be sure, McDougall did suggest (but only in passing) that there might be differences between different races with respect to the relative strengths of the same innate tendencies, and that these innate factors might also be favored or checked—though not altered—by the social circumstances obtaining at different stages of human culture. However, neither theory recognized that institutions are not based solely on how individuals naturally tend to behave, but are in large measure formed through circumstances and through heritages from the past.

In contradistinction to the orientation of these instinctivist types of social theorizing, another form of individualistic theory arose in the late nineteenth century. It had its roots in German idealism, and its position was developed in deliberate opposition to both associa-
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tionism and a biologically based instinctivist psychology. Its view of the individual stressed the fact that man is a self-developing and self-transforming being, and that the conditions necessary for his development are his social relations with his fellows. It was because of such needs that human societies develop, and it is only through society that the purposes of the individual can be fulfilled. Later, we shall deal in some detail with this purposive theory; what is here important to note is the stress which it placed on the harmony between the individual and society. This was an important influence on the development of both social psychology and sociology in the ensuing period, and in that development any apparent opposition between individualistic and institutional approaches to social theory was presumably overcome.

At the same time there came to be growing interest in cultural anthropology as a special discipline and, through the influence of Franz Boas and others, attempts to explain society and culture in terms of inherited characteristics were severely challenged by establishing that the variations in culture could not be accounted for in terms of biological inheritance. Among other factors, Boas investigated changes in physical characteristics, particularly the cephalic index, of individual members of a family when that family moved from one cultural environment to another, and these studies—along with others concerned with so-called racial differences—had a considerable influence in undermining the emphasis which had been placed on the role of inherited traits in accounting for cultural differences. It was at approximately the same time that behaviorism challenged the existence of most supposed cases of instinctive behavior; instead, the concept of conditioning became a widely accepted way of explaining what previously had been held to be the inborn tendency for animals and for men to act in specific ways. The concept of conditioning, which had originally had a precise meaning, soon came to be used in a loose, extended sense, and “social conditioning” became a common way of accounting for a wide variety of forms of individual behavior. Thus, different patterns of action in different societies tended to be attributed to “social conditioning,” and there the question of explanation frequently stopped. In fact, it soon became fairly common to reject the assumption that some characteristics of individuals were innate, whereas others were acquired. At this point, the hyphenated phrase “personality-and-culture” came to be widely used as a way of suggesting that psychological processes could not be considered apart from cultural phenomena, and that culture could not be considered except in terms of the behavior of
individuals. This tendency to conflate individual and institutional phenomena was symbolized in, and greatly encouraged by, those who had coined a new collective term, "the behavioral sciences," which was to include all that had formerly been classified under psychology as well as what had been included in the social sciences. As of now, there seems to be no important tendency to reject the assumptions on which this movement rests: thus it might seem as if the controversy between individualism and institutionalism has been laid to rest.

II

While it may be true that when we look at these positions as they have developed historically, there was no necessary reason for the controversy to have developed, yet it is by no means clear that we should be satisfied with hyphenating these approaches. In fact, it is always doubtful whether one can solve complex problems through applying only one set of concepts: in order to cut through a problem one needs more than a sharp blade—there is also needed something that will provide resistance to the blade. Therefore, in what follows I shall argue that while it is unsatisfactory to adopt either a purely individualistic or a purely institutional approach, it is equally unsatisfactory to break down the distinction between what can be explained in terms of psychological concepts and what must be explained with reference to the societal context in which individuals act. Instead of attempting to obliterate that distinction, I shall argue that it must be maintained whenever one attempts to explain what occurs in organized social life.

This is not to say that when one is attempting to explain the behavior of an individual, one should draw what might appear to be an analogous distinction, attempting to isolate what belongs to the individual because of his or her biological inheritance from whatever effects the culture of his society has had upon him. There can be no doubt that the genetic constitution of each individual does play an important role in what he can or cannot become, but his actual development is not to be explained through inherited factors alone. Throughout the course of any individual's development, what is inherited and what derives from the culture in which he lives are inextricably fused. This has been established in our society even with respect to the physical effects of socioeconomic factors insofar as they affect prenatal development. Furthermore, regardless of the society into which a child is born, as the process of enculturation pro-
ceeds it becomes more and more impossible to isolate any aspects of behavior which are wholly attributable to inherited factors, or to find traits which have developed independently of potentialities which have been inherited. Yet, this interpenetration of what is inherited and what is socially acquired should not be assumed to hold when what one is to explain does not refer to the behavior of specific individuals, but concerns the question of how one is to account for that which occurs in organized social life.

Of course, societies exist only when individuals exist, and what occurs in a society would not occur except for the activities of individuals who, at any time, participate in its life. Consequently, one could not explain what occurs in a society without reference to the activities of individuals. However, from what has been said concerning the interpenetration of inherited and socially acquired factors in an individual’s life, the individuals to whom one must make reference when dealing with social institutions are individuals who have already been shaped by society: they are not to be considered as if they had been stripped of all the characteristics which they had acquired through the social life in which they have shared. Unfortunately, those individualistic social theorists who had been influenced by the model of analytic mechanics did not recognize this fact, but built their theories directly on traits which they assumed to be the fundamental, common characteristics of all people.

The holistic theorists who reacted against this individualistic approach did not for a moment deny that the existence of societies depends upon the existence and activities of individuals. What they stressed was the extent to which individuals depend upon the accumulation of culture in order for them to be what they in fact are: truly human beings. Yet, they tended to press the importance of cultural inheritance even further, holding that it represented a force of such power that no individual could successfully resist it or alter its course. Consequently, when explaining what occurred in history, they did not appeal to the goals and efforts of individuals, but to what continued to be vital in the traditions of a people and to what changes occurred in the institutions which were fundamental in a society’s life. While this was the extreme toward which anti-individualistic theories tended to move, it was not entailed by the fact that individuals are dependent upon their societies. Consequently, there is no reason why it should not be possible to account for social organization and social change through a joint appeal to individual and institutional factors, and that is what I contend one must do.

There is one objection to such a claim that must immediately be
faced, for it has been raised in various forms by many different theoreticians of the social sciences. It consists in denying that institutions can be made to serve an explanatory function because they are not "real" in the same sense as individuals are real. The crudest form of this claim has stressed the fact that institutions, unlike individuals, cannot be pointed to, touched, or otherwise made manifest to the senses, nor can instruments indicate their presence and measure their effects; therefore, they cannot be a subject for scientific investigation. Whatever may be the merits of a behavioristic approach to animal behavior, or even to some psychological investigations concerning humans, such an approach is irrelevant to the explanation of human actions in social situations. The explanation of social action cannot avoid taking meanings and intentions into account, and neither meanings nor intentions are factors which are directly manifest to the senses. In fact, strictly speaking, when we encounter our neighbors, or our employers, what is "manifest to the senses" does not reveal them as our neighbors or employers, and therefore has no direct relation to why it is that we behave differently toward them than we do to any chance passerby.

Not all social theorists who object to speaking of institutions as "real" would subscribe to an unmitigated behaviorism. For example, Melville Herskovits adopted a more moderate position when he held that the notion of an institution was simply a heuristic concept, permitting the investigator to refer in summary fashion to the ways in which individuals who belong to a certain society behave toward one another under particular circumstances. Thus, while admitting that "culture can be studied without taking human beings into account," and that "it is essential that the structure of a culture" be understood first of all, if the reasons why a people behave as they do are to be grasped," he nevertheless insisted that "when culture is closely analyzed, we find but a series of patterned reactions that characterize the behavior of individuals who constitute a given group." Consequently, although granting the usefulness, for the purposes of study, of reifying such patterned reactions as if they had objective existence, Herskovits insisted that in actuality they were simply "the discrete experiences of individuals in a group at a certain time."

There are aspects of social life in which a position such as this seems to be unexceptionable. For example, it probably presents no difficulties with respect to a cultural phenomenon such as language: one must understand a given language before understanding the utterances of a given speaker, yet the language itself is not an entity
different from the ways in which it is used by those speaking or writing it. Furthermore, noting the ways in which languages change, it is reasonable to think of a language as a phenomenon depending on a continuous chain whereby influences spread in a series of acts of communication and in which, therefore, only individuals are ultimately involved.\textsuperscript{13} Nevertheless, as Herskovits would admit, although language—like all other aspects of culture—can be studied as a phenomenon produced by the action of individuals, it is not to be identified with the individuals upon whom its existence depends. The language an individual speaks, or the types of tools he uses, may be produced by him, but they are not literally parts of him; and the changes he undergoes and the changes they undergo do not follow parallel lines. The need to distinguish between individuals and such aspects of culture as language and tools is so obvious that it is not apt to be challenged; rather, it is apt to be overlooked. Nonetheless, it is important to focus attention on it in order to understand what falls within the purview of the social sciences and what does not. This, as I now wish to show, is relevant to understanding the place of psychology among other disciplines.

Psychology is often classed as one of the social sciences, but insofar as it is actually cross-cultural, seeking to explain various aspects of individual behavior which do not depend upon the society to which an individual belongs, its concern is with the individual, not with the culture which the activities of individuals produce. Nevertheless, since culture does depend upon the activities of individuals, whatever is relevant to explaining individual behavior has possible relevance for understanding culture. In some areas this connection is especially intimate; in others it is relatively remote. For example, psycholinguistics is a branch of psychology which is intimately connected with other areas of language study, and it is therefore easy to see why, when one chooses such an example, psychology should be regarded as if it were one of the social or behavioral sciences. On the other hand, if one considers the history of technology one finds that psychology has relatively little to contribute to understanding it, even though technological inventions and their uses depend upon the activities of individuals. The same is of course true with respect to the arts. Thus, we may say that psychology may sometimes make very important contributions to the study of culture, but sometimes it has relatively meager contributions to make. In neither case, however, should it be regarded as a social science, since its attention is always focused on individual behavior, whether that behavior is social or not.
On the other hand, insofar as a social scientist studies individual behavior, he or she does so not in order to explain that behavior itself, but in order to understand how it affects some feature or features of human societies. These features fall into two broad classes, which I find it important to distinguish, but which are not always distinguished. On the one hand, there are features, such as language, which are most properly designated as belonging to the culture of a people; on the other hand, there are the institutions which structure a society, and which thereby serve to define the status and roles of different individuals within the society. That which belongs to culture is transmitted from person to person through processes such as imitation or example, and includes not only language and technology but also customary habits and systems of belief. In contrast to these and other features of the culture of a people, any society has an institutional organization which defines the specific relations in which various individuals stand with respect to one another. For example, every society has a kinship system, some form of organized economic life according to which what is produced is distributed, rules governing marriage, and an organization of authority regulating various aspects of communal life. These interlocking systems serve to define property relations, the roles of male and female, and the status of the young and their elders, and they also control the distribution of actual power in various spheres of communal life. These are merely some of the most obvious factors in the complex structure which is present in any society and which, unlike the elements of its culture, serve to limit and define the status which particular individuals come to occupy in that society. Obviously, some of the cultural aspects of a particular society will affect its institutions as well as being affected by them: for example, technology affects and is affected by economic activities, just as systems of belief affect and are affected by the locus of what is recognized as authority. The difference lies in the fact that the position of an individual in his society is defined in institutional and not cultural terms. For example, when a person's form of speech serves to identify him as belonging to a certain group within a society—for example, an ethnic or racial minority—it is not the language he has acquired but the place of that group in society that leads to granting or denying him particular privileges or powers. Similarly, dress and manners may identify persons as belonging to a certain class within a society, but it is not these aspects of culture but the status of that class within the institutional structure of the society that tends to bestow or deny privileges. As these illustrations suggest, not all cultural elements need be diffused
in identical form throughout a particular society. At the same time, one must also note that many cultural elements—such as a language, a particular form of technology, or a system of beliefs—may spread beyond the boundaries of any one society, in some cases changing as they spread, yet in other cases—such as science and technology—remaining substantially unaltered. Thus, culture and society not only differ in character but are also not to be regarded as coterminous.

When this is recognized, it becomes clear that the nature of a society cannot be adequately analyzed, as Herskovits claimed, into a series of patterned reactions. What is missing in such a definition is the extent to which societies regulate individual behavior through institutions which prescribe the obligations, rights, and privileges of individuals who occupy different statuses and play different roles within the organized social group. In fact, when Herskovits turned his attention to "Social Organization: The Structure of Society," he spoke of institutions as determining the position of men and women in society, as "dictating the relationships between the sexes and providing for the continuation of the group," as well as providing "the mechanisms for regulating conduct" without which "the integration of the individual into society would not be possible." Thus, institutions are not merely a series of patterned reactions which individuals have somehow acquired; rather, they play an active role in creating the groups whose behavior evince such patterns.

As Herskovits pointed out, earlier anthropologists had frequently interpreted institutions in this manner, that is, as entities which they treated as being "objectively real." He, on the contrary, held that every aspect of a society's culture (including its institutional structures) "is a construct which describes the similar modes of conduct of those who make up a given society. . . . In the final analysis, behavior is always the behavior of individuals however it may lend itself to summary in generalized terms." There are, however, several difficulties in this view, one of which I regard as insuperable. As is clear from the preceding quotation, Herskovits assumed that one knows what constitutes "a given society": he does not speak as if he regarded the notion of "a society" as a construct. Yet, as we have seen, cultural phenomena such as language, technology, and systems of belief need not be coterminous with a particular society, and if institutions exist only as patterns of individual behavior which are brought under a general concept by an anthropologist for his own heuristic purposes, they will not provide a basis for distinguishing one society from another. In short, there
must be a system of authority regulating the behavior of a group of
individuals if one is to speak of a society as one particular entity. If all
social phenomena were simply the thought and actions of indi­
viduals, "a society" would be as much a construct on the part of the
anthropologist as institutions are claimed to be.

Unlike Herskovits and many other recent anthropologists, even
those sociologists who had been influenced by behaviorism, and by
the views of science associated with the behavioristic movement in
psychology, did not equate the structural aspects of society with the
ways in which individuals actually behave. Instead of attending to
what was directly descriptive of individual behavior, they focused
attention on the general pattern of interpersonal relationships.
This approach differed from the views of earlier sociologists, such as
Comte and Durkheim, in being individualistic, regarding institu­
tions as by-products of interpersonal relations; it differed also in not
being concerned with the historical contexts in which particular
forms of institutions develop. The task of sociology, as they con­
ceived it, was to discover basic principles regarding the relational
aspects of group activities. For example, by using broad concepts such
as cooperation and conflict, or leadership, they believed it possible to
generalize concerning group organization, regardless of whether
such groups were small and informal, whether they were crowds,
political parties, or religious institutions. A formal sociology of this
type, based on analyses of interpersonal action, had first been advo­
cated by Georg Simmel, using a Kantian distinction between form
and content, but was later adapted to a positivistic philosophy of
science by Leopold von Wiese in Germany and by George Lundberg
and others in the United States. It involved abandoning the view of
most earlier sociologists that sociology was to be concerned with
concrete analyses of different types of society, and with the specific
factors which promoted stability or change in them. Instead, they
argued that every science abstracts some particular feature of the
environing world as its own particular subject of inquiry, and they
held that the province of sociology should be a concern with the
general forms of relationship which occur in all human societies
regardless of all the differences they may exhibit in other respects.

While the attempt to construct a general sociology on this purely
formal basis did not have a profound or lasting effect on either the­
oretical or empirical sociology, there was a steady growth of interest
in studying more restricted similarities and differences in the struc­
tural properties of specific types of organization. Weber's analysis of
the three types of authority—the traditional, the charismatic, and
the rational-bureaucratic—had wide influence, as did Robert Michels' studies of oligarchical organization in political parties and in labor unions. These and other structural studies were not based on any general theory regarding formal relationships characterizing the whole society, nor were they merely descriptive of particular instances: they sought to abstract generalizations from concrete cases, and their generalizations were subsequently refined and developed by others, leading to the formulation of similar, historically testable generalizations in successive areas of concern.

Other sociologists, following the lead of Durkheim, took another turn, being primarily concerned with establishing the structural unity of social systems and with understanding the dysfunctions which might develop within these systems. Like Durkheim, they were frequently concerned with the effects which such unity, or lack of unity, had on individual behavior. While Durkheim dealt with this more or less systematically, and in general terms, a great deal of interest within applied sociology dealt with the same type of problem in terms of specific factors such as "social lag" or with respect to the nature of specific situations in which dysfunctions developed. The classic work of Thomas and Znaniecki, *The Polish Peasant*, belongs in this general category. In such studies the emphasis lay on how the structural features of a society influence individual behavior, but the same type of question was taken up from the point of view of social psychology, instead of sociology, by Kurt Lewin and those influenced by him. Instead of dealing with the institutional structure of a society, they studied how the structure of specific social situations affected the performance and attitudes of those exposed to them. For example, a whole series of studies dealt with the differing effects on children of authoritarian and nonauthoritarian classroom situations. Once such studies became common, it seemed equally reasonable to proceed in the opposite direction: instead of explaining the effects of structure on personality, there were attempts to explain differences in social institutions by means of the personality traits that a particular society tended to foster in its members. For example, under the influence of Freudian theory, it became fairly common among a few political scientists and among some influential anthropologists to offer explanations of the fundamental nature of different social systems in terms of child-rearing practices.

As a consequence of the prevalence of a wide variety of such studies, focusing on the ways in which various social situations affect individual behavior and on how individual behavior reflects important features of societal life, a conviction developed that there
was no reason to distinguish between psychology and the social sciences. It was in this context that, as we have seen, the concept of the “behavioral sciences” was born. The most ambitious attempt to establish a general framework for a unified theory that would include all facets of social life was Talcott Parsons’ use of the concept of social action. Without entering into a critical discussion of that system, nor of various attempts to make psychology the foundation of all social science, I shall argue for the essentially pluralistic nature of the social sciences, in contrast to the now fashionable rubric the “behavioral sciences.” In this connection, I shall first consider reasons for denying that psychology—and even social psychology—is to be considered a social science.

As I have already suggested, even though every individual is deeply affected by the nature of his cultural background and by the character of his society, the task of psychology is to formulate concepts and establish generalizations which can be applied to all individuals, regardless of differences in their backgrounds. It might be thought that to pursue such a goal is to pursue a chimera, since individuals who have been reared under different social conditions will exhibit very different traits. Yet, such differences do not preclude the possibility of offering generalizations which apply to all individuals. That such is the case with regard to physiological functions is, I suppose, universally recognized; that it is also the case with respect to many psychological functions—such as vision and audition, or memory and learning—is not likely to be denied. It seems to me to be no less true with respect to many traits of great importance in interpersonal relations, but I shall illustrate this with respect to only one such trait: that which was once commonly referred to as “self-esteem.”

It is, I submit, a useful hypothesis—though one not amenable to experimental test—that self-esteem is an important need in all individuals, regardless of the societies to which they belong. To be sure, the types of action capable of satisfying a need for self-esteem will vary from society to society, yet there are many aspects of individual behavior which cannot be explained unless the value of self-esteem is taken into account. This is a fact that pertains to psychology, but is also a fact which it is important for such social scientists as political scientists, economists, and sociologists to understand. Conversely, a psychologist is in need of help from historians, anthropologists, and sociologists to explain why in one society self-esteem is fostered by a particular form of behavior, whereas in other societies the same form of behavior would lead to a sense of degradation and shame. That
difference can be said to be due to the "meaning" that attaches to the same form of behavior in different societies, but such a difference in meaning can be explained only by the histories and the structures of these societies, not by the investigations of psychologists. Thus, even in cases where the most intimate cooperation between psychologists and social scientists is called for, the contribution which each can make to a common understanding remains separate and distinct.

To this it might be objected that even if such were the case when one is dealing with differences in what fosters self-esteem in different societies, it would not apply to those cases in which two individuals raised in the same society—and even two siblings—might pursue entirely different paths to enhance their self-esteem. In such cases, it might be argued, the explanation would be wholly psychological: one sibling, for example, might have identified with the values of his or her parents whereas the other might have revolted against them and their values. Could it not then be the case that the differences between the two siblings depended solely upon the psychological relationships which had developed within this particular family, rather than reflecting what was present within the society at large? Unfortunately for such an argument, whatever relations exist between child and parent in the nuclear family are not isolated from the norms for parental-child relationships which are current in society. For a psychologist to understand what led each sibling to pursue a different path toward self-esteem, he must not only be aware of the psychological forces which led one sibling to rebel against his or her parents, and the other to identify with them, but must also be aware of the norms of behavior within that society, or he will be unable to explain why each sibling sought the sort of goals which he or she actually sought. Thus, even in these cases the explanation of different ways of satisfying a need for self-esteem will not be purely psychological, but will involve an understanding of the norms inherent in the social structure to which the individuals belong.

What holds as between psychology and the social sciences generally can also be said to hold among the various social sciences themselves: each is distinct from the others, though each can contribute to the understanding which the others seek. This is commonly acknowledged, but scant attention has been paid to what makes them distinct as well as related. To clarify this question it is necessary to distinguish between the descriptive elements present in every science and the attempt by every science to formulate generalizations or laws.

As is now almost universally recognized, every explanation of a
concrete occurrence or of specific types of occurrences must appeal
to some generalization or generalizations as to what can be expected
to occur under particular circumstances. Such generalizations, how­
ever, cannot in and of themselves explain any specific occurrence
unless the conditions obtaining with respect to that occurrence are
specified. Specification of the initial and boundary conditions that
permit one either to predict or to explain particular occurrences con­
stitutes the necessary descriptive element in any scientific explana­
tion, but description without at least a tacit use of generalizations
provides no answer to any question as to why a particular object
behaves as it does, or why a particular event has occurred. This is as
true in the social sciences as it is in the natural sciences, though in
the most advanced natural sciences, such as physics, the descriptive
element occupies a relatively minor place, whereas in the social sci­
ences descriptions have been easier to formulate than have adequate
generalizations or laws. All descriptions in the social sciences con­
cern institutional structures which order social life, but each concen­
trates attention on one rather than another facet of the overall struc­
ture of society. Since all are facets of one and the same society, it is not
surprising that at many points any social science must draw upon the
descriptive elements dealt with in the other social sciences. If it
failed to do so, concentrating only on describing conditions with
respect to the institutions with which it is primarily concerned, it
would have insufficient data concerning the initial conditions and
(especially) the boundary conditions to which its generalizations
were to be applied.

The need for one social science to take account of the descriptive
materials which lie within the special province of another social
science should not, however, lead us to suppose that the laws or
lawlike generalizations to be found in any particular social science
have a special relationship to the laws of any other social science.
Thus, while an economist may have to know what occurred in the
sphere of government or international relations in order to explain a
particular economic crisis, he need not use any generalizations
drawn from political science in order to explain the relationships
among the economic factors with which he deals. In short, no social
science has a monopoly on any particular set of data, but the gener­
alizations each attempts to formulate are limited in scope: each deals
with a different aspect of the societies with which all are presumably
concerned.21

If it is true, as I have argued, that every science, including the
social sciences, involves both description and generalization, the
question arises as to how history as a special discipline is related to the social sciences. When one considers that question historically, it is clear that the writing of history had long been a part of Western culture before there were many concerted attempts to establish general principles concerning politics, and certainly before there had been serious attempts to do so concerning such other factors of social organization as those which govern economic life. To be sure, both Aristotle and Herodotus approximated the types of generalizations which we currently regard as falling within the range of the social sciences, and there had also been a long tradition of normative social theory in which ideals of political and social organization were formulated and discussed; however, nothing like a systematic study of matters of fact concerning these topics developed until the eighteenth century, which saw the appearance of relevant works by Montesquieu, Quesnay, Smith, and others. Until then, historical writings were looked upon as the most important source of whatever understanding could be gained concerning the causes and consequence of political actions, and the advantages and disadvantages of different forms of political, economic, and social organization.

On the other hand, while those who were bent on establishing basic principles regarding political, economic, and social life did not wholly neglect past history, they relied more heavily on abstract analysis than on data drawn from the past. In fact, even the founders of sociology, such as Ferguson, Comte, and Spencer, who were historically minded, regarded conventional historical writing with contempt instead of viewing it as a possible source of data and—even more importantly—as a means of corroborating or correcting the generalizations which they attempted to establish through their own interpretations of the past. To be sure, there was some justification for their unwillingness to use traditional historical writing as a basis for their generalizations concerning society, since such writings were mainly cast as narratives of politics and statecraft and did not deal comprehensively with most other aspects of the organization of social life. Unfortunately, although historians at the time were increasing the range of materials they considered germane to their tasks and were also becoming more critical of their sources, they tended not to consider what they might gain from contemporary investigations of the economic factors operative in society and of other factors which influenced the organization of social life. While Buckle’s work signaled a change in this respect, both the range of his data and his success were limited. With the possible exception of John Millar, only Marx fully appreciated the necessity of linking abstract social
analysis with a careful study of historical fact, and unfortunately his polemical purposes and his desire to inspire revolutionary action sometimes interfered with his success in achieving the fusion of theoretical adequacy and historical accuracy which it was his aim to effect.

The prevalent split between historical description and the generalizations of the nascent social sciences was regarded by some as a necessary and important feature in the economy of knowledge. This split was characterized in a rectoral address by Wilhelm Windelband in 1894 as the difference between the "ideographic" interests of historians and the "nomothetic" approach of the sciences. It had also been signalized by Dilthey in his distinction between the activity of understanding [verstehen] and that of explaining [erklären]. While such a distinction, as we shall see, is relevant to some aspects of historical understanding, the contrast which it drew between history and the sciences was in most respects misleading. In the first place, it overlooked the element of description, which is an aspect of all natural sciences, not only with respect to the events which they wish to explain but also with respect to the conditions—whether natural or experimental—under which those events occur and with respect to the description of the effects which follow from those events. To be sure, all such description is undertaken in the interest of arriving at an explanation of a particular type of phenomenon, and is not an end in itself. This being the case, one might argue that the basic distinction between an ideographic and a nomothetic approach to phenomena remains a valid though perhaps overdrawn distinction. However, when the issue is approached from the other direction, it is clear that such is not the case. Ideographic description is not free of nomothetic elements: it always presupposes some framework of generalizations in terms of which it is to be viewed. For example, a historian can attempt to reconstruct the past from documents, monuments, and other signs of past activities only by assuming that there are similarities in human nature such that he can interpret past actions in terms of analogies drawn from how he himself and his contemporaries behave. Furthermore, in attempting to grasp the rudiments of past social structures he must appeal to his knowledge of the social structure in which he himself lives and to the structures of other present societies with which he has become directly or indirectly acquainted. Thus, every description of another society presupposes generalizations concerning both human behavior and the ways in which societies tend to be organized. Unless such generalizations draw upon a broad range of data, they are not likely to provide an
adequate framework for the description of societies remote in time or place from the historian's own. Consequently, the discipline of history must, at almost every point, make use of low-level generalizations, even though the historian's aim is not that of establishing laws concerning human behavior or concerning social structure and social change. Thus, it is a mistake to assume, as Windelband, Rickert, and others had assumed, that history deals with that which is unique and unrepeatable and that it does so by dispensing with generalizations of the sort at which the sciences aim.

Many factors serve to explain how this false notion arose. Among them were misconceptions regarding the sciences: not only was their descriptive component overlooked, but it was assumed that the essence of science lay in its ability to predict. [It was not recognized that prediction depends both on a knowledge of laws and on the possibility of knowing the initial and the boundary conditions which obtain with respect to that which one is to predict.] If science is to be identified with "prevision," as Comte claimed, history was not, and could not be, a science. On the other hand, not only history but all humanistic disciplines had disciplinary standards and were entitled to a place in the total economy of human knowledge. Given the prestige which the natural sciences enjoyed, it was natural for humanists to claim that their studies had a method distinct from that of the natural sciences, and one which was no less worthy of respect. That this was the case would best be justified by a contrast between two methods: the methods of the Kulturwissenschaften and those of the Naturwissenschaften, an ideographic and a nomothetic method, the first being a method aimed at interpretation and understanding, the second aimed at explaining.

Insofar as that dichotomy had plausibility, it depended on the fact that Dilthey and those who followed him were more interested in the history of culture—of philosophy, literature, the arts, and value systems—than in the institutions which structured the political, economic, and social life of societies. An adequate description of the various facets of culture almost always involves interpreting and understanding them prior to attempting to offer any explanations of the conditions which may serve to account for them. This is far less true with respect to events which concern the institutional structures of a society, such as the rise of a political party or the incidence of an economic depression. To be sure, such events must also be described, but their description is not isolable from the conditions out of which they arose nor from their relations to what occurred in other aspects of the same society at the same time. Thus, there are differences
between those types of methodology which are most appropriate for cultural historians on the one hand and for those concerned with institutional histories on the others. These differences are reflected in the situation which presently exists in history as an academic discipline: some of its concerns bring it very close to the domain of the social sciences, providing social scientists with materials for analytic and systematic studies, whereas others remain close to the sphere of humanistic studies, providing a background for interpreting and evaluating the various elements which constitute a given society's cultural heritage. Each type of historian must use some of the work of those who are primarily concerned with areas outside his or her own primary areas of concern, since various elements in a culture may affect the institutional structure of a society, and institutional changes often have a profound effect on cultural change.

Thus, no sharp line can be drawn between cultural and institutional historians. Yet, neither aspect of historiography is solely concerned with individuals or solely concerned with cultural and institutional phenomena. As we shall see, every explanation of facts concerning societies and their cultures will, at some points, have to take account of the contributions of individuals, though the focus of interest will not be on these individuals themselves; instead, it will be on their place in a cultural and institutional setting, and on whatever contributions in these areas may be attributable to them. On the other hand, we shall also see that the efficacy of an individual's actions is always relative to the cultural and institutional situation in which he acts. Because of these constraints on the actions of individuals, some social theorists have been led to stress the concept of necessity in explaining what occurs in social life.

In the chapters that follow, we shall have to disentangle the changes which the concepts of "purpose" and "necessity" have undergone in the course of modern social theory, attempting to state in what senses each has a role to play in understanding social life. To this end, the next chapter will consider how each of these concepts has been used by those who have adopted the methodology of individualism in their social theories, while the third chapter will show how the same concepts have functioned among those adopting an institutional approach. The final section of the book will then be able to draw together the strands of these arguments and, after analyzing the concepts of chance and choice, will then reach some conclusions as to the roles of purpose and necessity in social life.