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CANADIAN JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY
Volume XIII, Number 4, December 1983

CRITICAL NOTICE

ALAN GARFINKEL, *Forms of Explanation: Rethinking the Questions in Social Theory* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press 1981). Pp. 186. $16.00.

Explanations of individual behaviour and social regularities frequently make reference to social facts. We account for certain individuals' being rich, bigoted, unemployed or unruly by noting their social roles and social positions; we explain social facts like the constant rate of suicide in a particular region by pointing to the presence of constant social pressures, interests and institutions. Yet many philosophers and social scientists spurn this type of explanation. Without denving that such explanation often seems entirely appropriate, they insist that both individual and group behaviour should be explained in terms of specific, non-social properties of individuals. They emphasize that people are rich or bigoted because of individual, non-social facts about them; and they argue that the constant rate of suicides must ultimately be explained in terms of facts about the suicides themselves. All else is held to be pure mystification.

In *Forms of Explanation*, Alan Garfinkel argues that individualism is methodologically unsound and a bad recipe for social policy because it rests on a radically defective theory of explanation. In Chapter 1, 'Explanatory Relativity,' he points out some features of a more adequate 'philosophy of explanation,' and in chapter 2 on 'Reduction' he takes up

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the general question of reducing macrophenomena to microphenomena. Chapter 3 on 'Individualism in Social Thought' is a sustained criticism of explanations of distributions of wealth and the like in terms of how these distributions arose, while chapter 4 on 'Biology and Society' is devoted to a critical examination of explanations of social stratification in terms of the distribution among individuals of stable, non-social properties. Finally, in the remaining two chapters, 'The Ethics of Explanation' and 'Beyond Relativism,' Garfinkel defends and develops some of the consequences of the general view about explanation presented in Chapters 1 and 2.

Forms of Explanation is not an easy book to read. Crucial points in the argument are scattered through the book; we are left to discover for ourselves exactly what individualism is supposed to involve; and Garfinkel devotes scant attention to relating his views to traditional debates about individualism. In addition the book is marred by Garfinkel's fondness for jargon, most of which only confuses his argument. What, for instance, is there to be gained from noting that explanations have 'literally millions of dimensions' (27) and on occasion become 'less and less stable' (31)? Nevertheless, despite these shortcomings, the book is always interesting and frequently brilliant. Garfinkel has a commendable interest in the practical consequences of individualism, and he has managed to ferret out some of the fundamental motivations of its proponents.

1. Individualistic and Structural Explanations

Individualists and anti-individualists agree that wealth, bigotry, unemployment and the like should be explained in terms of the properties of individuals. For the individualist, people do what they do as a result of their having certain psychological or other similar non-social properties, while for the anti-individualist, social properties having to do with social roles or interests must also be seen as playing a role. The debate between individualists and anti-individualists is thus basically one about the kinds of properties that individuals can be said to possess. Neither individualists nor anti-individualists challenge their opponents' conception of explanation.

By contrast, Garfinkel approaches individualism primarily by way of a critique of the individualist's conception of explanation. 'The principle strategy (of the book),' he tells us, is 'to attack the problem (of individualism) via an examination of the concept of explanation itself' (18). Against the underlying assumption of individualism and traditional

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anti-individualism, Garfinkel quite reasonably insists that explanation is a thoroughly pragmatic affair, it being always relative to our concerns and interests. When we explain something we do not explain it *tout court;* we explain it given certain presuppositions. We always have in mind what Garfinkel calls a 'contrast space,' that is a 'state of affairs and a definite space of alternatives to it' (21). Our interests and concerns determine the presuppositions we have, and these in turn determine the range of possibilities we consider.

As an illustration of these ideas, consider a biological system of foxes and rabbits (see p. 53). What answer we give to the question of why a particular rabbit was eaten by a fox will depend on our concerns, more specifically on the contrast space we have in mind. If we wish to explain why the rabbit was eaten by one fox rather than another, we shall speak of the rabbit's straying into the fox's 'capture space.' But if we wish to explain why the rabbit was eaten rather than not eaten, a more appropriate explanation might be in terms of the way in which the populations of rabbits and foxes fluctuate (e.g. we might note that the rabbit was caught when the population of foxes was high). In the one case, 'the rabbit' functions referentially and our concern is with a particular rabbit; in the other case, 'the rabbit' functions nonreferentially as in 'the rabbit eats lettuce' and our concern is with rabbits in general (see p. 176). Thus, the question of whether an individualistic explanation in terms of 'capture spaces' or a structuralist explanation in terms of populations should be given depends on our interests, not on the character of the phenomenon we want to explain.

These ideas apply directly to the debate about individualism in the social sciences. If our aim is to explain why Mr. A but not Ms. B rioted, our explanation will make reference to non-social factors about Mr. A. We shall take it as a presupposition that a certain number of people rioted, and we shall indicate the particular factors that led Mr. A to take to the streets. On the other hand, if our aim is to explain why Mr. A rioted rather than stayed indoors, we shall instead provide a structural explanation which makes reference to the social pressures on him and to his social role. In this case, we are less interested in why Mr. A as such rioted as in why people rioted; we speak of Mr. A non-referentially. In other words, whereas some questions call for individualistic explanations focusing on non-social properties, others call for structural explanations which emphasize social properties.[1]

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1 Such structural explanation, it should be noted, does not entail that individual behaviour is coerced by mysterious external forces. We may explain behaviour in terms of social roles and pressures yet renounce the view of classical 'structuralists' like Durkheim that 'society' forces individuals to behave as they do.

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From what has been said so far, it might seem as though Garfinkel believes that individualism and anti-individualism can be reconciled simply by noting that they purport to provide answers to different questions. But this is wrong. Garfinkel rejects what he calls the 'relativistic compromise': 'some objects (of explanation),' he notes, 'are superior to others' (168). In the case of the foxes and rabbits, for instance, 'we do not really want to know why that rabbit was in that exact place' (90); we want to know why it was likely to have been eaten wherever it was in the system. Individualistic explanations suffer from 'hyperconcreteness' (ibid.). What we require in the case of rioters no less than in the case of rabbits is an explanation of more general events. To be sure, when we concentrate on individuals 'non-referentially,' 'we forego a great deal of explanatory power, the power to answer individualistic questions'; but this is a small price to pay since 'we gain another kind of explanatory power, the power to explain and predict certain patterns in the overall ensemble' (168).

In developing these ideas, Garfinkel stresses the importance of appreciating that many systems incorporate alternative mechnisms for bringing about the same effect. Hyperconcrete explanations are likely to be inappropriate because they leave unexplained the fact that had the phenomenon not been produced the way that it was, it would have been produced some other way. When we explain why a rabbit was eaten by explaining why it was in the place it was at the time it was, we omit to mention the all important fact that it would probably have been eaten at some other time had it not been eaten when it was. And likewise for the case of the rioter: when we provide an individualistic explanation, we overlook the fact that Mr. A would have still taken to the streets had the situation not been exactly the way it was. As Garfinkel observes, in nearly all complex systems 'there is a redundant causality operating, the effect of which is to ensure that many *other* states, perturbations of the original microcause, would have produced the same result' (62).[2]

These considerations, which in general seem reasonable enough, should not be seen as posing a serious threat to individualism as normally understood. The individualist need deny neither the relevance of social facts to the explanation of individual behaviour nor Garfinkel's

2 Another interesting point that Garfinkel makes in connection with the unsuitability of hyperconcrete explanations is that they are of little value insofar as they only hold for the exact initial conditions specified. Rigorous accuracy in and of itself is useless in science since 'any real object is known only approximately' (170).

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point about causal redundancy. Individualism is primarily a doctrine about the explanation of social facts in general and social distributions in particular. The key issue is not whether the explanation of individual behaviour should make reference to social facts, but whether social facts can be accounted for in terms of the natures of and the interactions between particular individuals.

2. Explaining Social Distributions

Garfinkel develops a two-pronged attack on individualistic explanations of social distributions. He first criticizes explanations that purport to account for the distribution of properties in a society in terms of the sequences of events that led up to each individual's having the properties in question. In particular, Garfinkel rejects the suggestion that distributions of wealth can be explained with reference to way in which individuals accumulate their shares. Then Garfinkel considers individualistic explanations that place 'the explanatory focus on the individuals instead of the process' (105). It is a mistake, he argues, to relate social distributions to distribution of biological or psychological properties. Income cannot be correlated with prudence and initiative, nor social status with I.Q., nor unemployment with level of education.

Against the suggestion that distributions of wealth can be explained by conjoining explanations of how individual holdings were appropriated and passed along to their present owners, Garfinkel argues that the conjunction of a set of explanations of particular facts need not and usually will not explain the conjunction of the facts themselves. The conjunction of an explanation of why boys become doctors with an explanation of why girls become nurses will not be an explanation of why boys become doctors and girls nurses. For it is 'the contrast (between the facts) which demands explanation,' not each particular fact (89). Moreover, explanations in terms of sequences of events overlook the all-important phenomenon of redundant causality. If we explain the distribution of wealth in society in terms of how each individual's share arose, we shall leave unmentioned the crucial fact that had the distribution of shares not arisen in exactly the manner that it did, it would have arisen some other way. We shall make it seem as though the actual distribution arose by chance, whereas it had to arise – just as in the case of the foxes and rabbits a certain number of rabbits had to be eaten (cf. pp. 90-1).

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As for explanations of social distributions in terms of prior psychological or biological distributions, Garfinkel insists that properties like wealth are not the kind of properties that can be usefully correlated with non-social properties like industry, prudence and initiative. For suppose that income were correlated with a non-social property such as initiative. Since initiative is non-social, everybody can have it to a greater or lesser extent, and the degree to which they have it is independent of the degree to which anyone else has it. Thus, it is possible that everyone has initiative to a high degree and hence that everyone has a high income. But, of course, not everyone can be wealthy, since people can only be wealthy if others are poor. 'The term *rich* denotes what is a relational property (being able to command the time of others)' (86). In fact, since 'most if not all properties in social explanation are inherently relational,' we cannot possibly explain the social positions or roles of one individual independently of the positions and roles of other individuals (ibid.). Secondly, if we hold that social distributions can be explained in terms of non-social properties, how can we account for the apparent congruence between social needs and social structures? Once we accept an explanation of social structure in terms of the biological or psychological characteristics of individuals, we cannot turn around and explain it in terms of social needs. In fact, from the present standpoint, 'the perfect correspondence of biology with the needs of this or that form of social organization' must appear as 'something of a miracle' (111). For nobody can seriously maintain that human beings have genes or innate psychological dispositions corresponding to particular social arrangements.

The question to be asked about these arguments is not whether they are sound but whether they apply to all individualistic explanations. Garfinkel has certainly made a strong case against certain forms of individualism, but one may reasonably wonder whether he has addressed himself to the doctrine in its most persuasive and popular forms. Consider first the explanatory scheme employed by individualists like Adam Smith. Their approach is similar to the first strategy criticized by Garfinkel in that it purports to account for social distributions in terms of the activities of individuals. Yet this type of individualism does not presuppose that distributions can be explained by conjoining explanations of individual facts. Explanations of wealth, for instance, are not given in terms of how each individual acquired his or her share, but in a much more general way in terms of how a group of individuals build their holdings by trading with one another. Nor can individualistic accounts of the sort envisaged by Smith be faulted for overlooking the phenomenon of redundant causality. Quite the reverse. If a social distribution arises from many individuals' engaging in 'truck and barter,' the resulting 'market outcome' will remain essentially the same when a

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few individuals are removed or the character of their 'individual dynamics' slightly changed.[3]

Equally, many explanations relating social phenomena to biological or psychological differences are immune to Garfinkel's criticisms. The kinds of explanation urged by social Darwinists and sociobiologists, for example, are fully compatible with Garfinkel's point that social properties are inherently relational, and they provide an intelligible, if not particularly plausible, account of the congruence between social structures and social needs. The main claim of the social Darwinist and the sociobiologist is that individuals are struggling to survive in a competition for scarce resources. Thus, in general there can be no possibility of everyone's becoming wealthy, being employed and so on. In any competition some win only because others lose. Moreover, given competition and the struggle for continued existence, the link between biology and social needs is readily understandable. Natural selection brings needs and structures into harmony, and social organization is no more a miracle than the physical organization of the eye.

The suspicion that various important forms of individualism emerge unscathed from Garfinkel's critique is reinforced by an examination of certain allegedly structural explanations of social phenomena that Garfinkel himself provides. For he explicitly compares his own account of income distribution with a paradigm of individualistic explantion, namely the explanation of the distribution of velocities of gas molecules in terms of their interaction effects (see p. 96). And when explaining social stratification, he adopts the familiar individualist strategy of considering 'the protocapitalist market, the ur-market of the early classical economists like Adam Smith' (120). Individualists may well challenge the empirical plausibility of such explanations, but they are unlikely to object to them on methodological grounds.

3. Reductionism and Strict Independence

Garfinkel's rejection of individualism can be better understood by examining his treatment of reductionism in physics, especially his views about the reduction of thermodynamics to statistical mechanics. One

3 Cf. p. 161 where redundant causality is said to ensure that 'the overall system structure and dynamics' would remain the same were we to 'remove a few individuals' or 'change the initial conditions or the nature of the individual dynamics over a wide range.'

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would expect Garfinkel to be at pains to delineate the type of individualism involved in explanations of the characteristics of gases in terms of characteristics of their 'atomic constituents,' this being 'often held up as a paradigm for social individualism' (69). But instead he attempts to show that this type of explanation is – despite all appearances to the contrary – structural, not individualistic. Garfinkel's unusual and surprising view is that individualism must be rejected even granting that the characteristics of society arise from the characteristics of individuals in exactly the same way that the global properties of gases arise from the properties of individual molecules.

For Garfinkel, the global properties of gases cannot be explained 'as a simple aggregate of individuals' since 'we must make, in addition, strong assumptions about the *collective* possibilities of the system, assumptions that are imposed on the individual nature (of a gas molecule) and which do not in any sense folow from it' (71). Indeed, it is Garfinkel's view that the additional assumptions required – e.g. the assumption that the velocities of molecules obey the principles of conservation of energy – amount to 'a nontrivial sociology' (126). The observable properties of gases are actually a result of 'the form of social organization of the molecules' (ibid.).

The initial assumption of this argument – that individualism requires that 'global properties [arise] as a simple aggregate of independent individuals' – is one that Garfinkel stresses a number of times. When discussing the reduction of thermodynamics to statistical mechanics, he emphasizes that 'the global property "energy" (cannot be expressed) as the sum of two independent individual properties' (72). He argues that the 'the "individuals" (of a gas) are not really separable (they are "only approximately isolated")' (73). And he even explicitly states that structural rather than individualistic explanation is necessary 'whenever a global property is not simply a sum of N individual properties' (72).

But it is not at all clear that individualists are committed to so strong an independence assumption. In the first place, the assumption is violated by Newton's reduction of celestial to particle mechanics, which as Garfinkel says is 'one of the great paradigms of atomistic reduction' (67). For in this reduction the gravitational point masses which serve as 'atomic constituents' are not independent in Garfinkel's sense; they are 'centres of force' interrelated by Newton's three laws of motion and the law of gravitational attraction. Contrary to Garfinkel, they do not have 'an individual nature given by [Newton's] laws' (ibid.). In the second place, when we transpose the assumption to the social realm, we obtain a picture of society in which the individuals are completely isolated from one another. Whether or not such a view informs the deliberations of philosophers like Locke and Robert Nozick (see p. 87), it is certainly alien to the discussions of most individualists. From this standpoint,

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what Garfinkel provides is a critique not of individualism as such but of what he himself refers to as 'simpleminded atomism' (68). His arguments only apply to forms of individualism that incorporate his exceptionally strong independence assumption.[4]

Individualism as usually understood does not require that molecules and people behave totally independently of one another, but only that their behaviour be constrained by fixed 'laws of coexistence.' Just as Newtonians reduce the solar system to a system of centres of force interrelated by Newton's laws and the law of gravitation, followers of Adam Smith reduce the social system to a system of essentially acquisitive individuals interacting in accordance with the laws of supply and demand, and social Darwinists and sociobiologists think of society as a system of individuals competing with one another for scarce resources. It is this idea – that individuals with 'fixed natures' interact with one another in fixed, lawlike ways – that is at the heart of individualism, not the independence assumption on which Garfinkel lays so much stress. Garfinkel is surely right to maintain that 'behind any would-be individualism, there are structural presuppositions at work' (75). But this point, which is the main burden of chapters 3 and 4, is one that individualists need not dispute.

It should now be clear why Garfinkel pays little attention to explanations like those provided by Adam Smith and the social Darwinists and why he does not see himself as being in an odd position when he rejects individualism even as he provides apparently individualistic explanations of social distributions. Motivating his thinking is the point that most putatively individualistic explanations – be they of physical or social phenomena – are fundamentally structural. Garfinkel treats the explanations of Adam Smith and the social Darwinists cursorily because they do not purport to explain global properties as simple aggregates of individual properties. In fact, so strong is the grip of this conception on Garfinkel's thinking, he takes it to be a major problem for social Darwinism that its central assumption, 'that society is competitive, flatly contradicts [the] independence assumption' (113). On the other hand, Garfinkel sees no tension between his rejecting individualism and his proposing apparently individualistic explanations since these explana-

4 That there is no mention of the pragmatics of explanation in this discussion of reductionism is in line with Garfinkel's practice but not his theory. For Garfinkel, 'reduction, which is on its face an ontological question, is really a question about the possibility of explanation' (49). But it might also be argued that reduction is only reasonably seen as a question about the possibility of explanation if explanation is understood in a traditional, 'non-pragmatic' way. This view is briefly defended in my 'Putnam and Reduction', *Cognition*, **3** (1974) 289-93.

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tions violate the independence assumption that he takes to be essential to all forms of individualism. Had Garfinkel adopted a more standard notion of individualism, he need not have seen his explanations as being any less individualistic than Adam Smith's.

Garfinkel thus concedes to individualists all that they want, except perhaps the name. In fact, individualists are likely to feel more encouraged than cautioned by Garfinkel's challenge. For them, it is unimportant whether the explanation of the pressure of a gas in terms of its consituent molecules is genuinely individualistic; what matters is the substantive claim that societies can be viewed in the same way that physicists view gases.

4. Against Individualism

But how plausible is the analogy between individuals in a society and molecules in a gas? Is it reasonable to think that social properties can be accounted for in the same way as the global properties of gases? Against Garfinkel's view no less than against traditional individualism, it may be argued that the nature of human beings, unlike the nature of molecules, is affected by the company they keep. Granting that human beings and molecules are alike in that they are both subject to 'structural constraints,' we may nevertheless insist that they differ because human beings are at least partially 'constituted' by the way in which they interrelate. Admittedly, this is a difficult doctrine. But the fact that many philosophers and social scientists think it a mistake to consider human beings in abstraction from all social considerations suggests that Garfinkel's view is more problematic than he seems willing to admit.[5]

This criticism of individualism can be supplemented and strengthened by focusing on the character of the laws which individualists take to govern the interactions between individuals. Once we grant that individual behaviour is subject to structural constraints, we may set aside the question of whether the nature of individuals is partially constituted by their interactions with other individuals and focus instead on the question whether the laws governing these interactions depend on the character of the prevailing social institutions. Is it plausible to think that the structural constraints that Garfinkel's analysis has highlighted can be considered independently of all social considerations? Is it likely that in-

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5 For more details, see Henry Laycock's review of *Forms of Explanation* in Canadian Philosophical Reviews, **2** (1982) 93-6.

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dividuals in advanced industrial societies interact with one another in the same way as individuals in primitive, nonindustrial ones?

When the problem is stated this way, it seems clear that individualism even in the broad sense I have been considering must be rejected. We do not have to commit ourselves to the daunting task of clarifying the idea that human nature is constituted by social relations; we can simply point out the implausibility of thinking that the laws governing human behaviour are as fixed as those governing the motions of molecules. To be sure, it might occasionally be possible to explain a social fact in terms of the principles of interaction that obtained when societies were first being formed. But normally one will have to make reference to the very different principles that govern the interactions in highly structured social institutions. What is usually relevant is not the ways in which individuals came together to form a society, but how individuals in already existing social institutions develop new institutions. In this type of case, it makes no sense to appeal to the principles of interaction that govern the behaviour of individuals whatever the social environment. We must instead look to the principles that govern their interactions in specific and usually extraordinarily complex social institutions.

Individualism only seems plausible because we forget that societies develop by passing through a series of struturally quite different stages. It may well be that the principles governing interactions between aggressive or acquisitive individuals play a crucial role in the development of certain rudimentary social forms, but it is another matter entirely to maintain that the same principles play the same role in modern, highly stratified societies. The most reasonable assumption is that the individual characteristics that give rise to primitive social configurations figure less and less prominently in later developments. As new social forms arise, individuals will tend to interact in entirely new ways. In this regard if in no other, gases and societies are entirely different.

The problem with individualism is thus not that it overlooks the social dimension but that it fails to take it sufficiently into account. The individualist's mistake is to think that the interactions between individuals are governed by principles that remain the same regardless of the prevailing social environment. One can understand the reluctance of individualists to reify social institutions, but there can be no excuse for their failure to acknowledge how institutions mediate the way in which people interact with one another. Institutions do not coerce individuals to behave as they do, but how people behave – even people with the same 'essential natures' – depends on the institutions that they and their predecessors helped to form.

These considerations, however, should not be seen as detracting from the many sound observations that Garfinkel makes concerning

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social explanation. He is right to insist on the importance of considering the collective possibilities of systems. However inadequate the analogy of societies with gases, it clearly reveals the crucial role of 'structural presuppositions.' He is right to point out that there is no 'natural,' 'objective' level at which explanations of macrophenomena should be pitched. Explanation 'seeks its own level'; where we pitch our explanations depends on the causal redundancies and structural factors involved and 'typically this will not be (at) the level of the underlying substratum' (59). Finally, Garfinkel is surely right to maintain that income distribution depends on the coalitions already existing in society (see p. 96) and to point out that in cases of social stratification 'small differences will be reinforced in a positive feedback' (121). Fortunately, Garfinkel's acceptance of the analogy between gases and societies is less than complete.

5. Practical Consequences

Perhaps the most appealing aspect of *Forms of Explanation* is the attention Garfinkel pays to the relationship between social theory and social policy. An underlying theme of the book is that an emphasis on individual behaviour at the expense of social interests, roles and institutions can result in unsatisfactory, even pernicious, policy directives. On the one hand, Garfinkel maintains that 'value consequences follow from the choice of what is to count as a relevant alternative to (the state of affairs being explained)' (146); on the other hand, he argues that individualistic and structural explanations suggest quite different ways of remedying social ills.

According to Garfinkel, we should reject the view that policy makers select goals and scientists determine the best means to the goals they select. Values are not merely implicated in the use to which scientific results are put; they are implicated even in the scientist's choice of explanatory framework. Since explanations always presuppose a prior choice of 'contrast space,' any advice derived from them 'will be advice only on navigating among ... recognized alternatives' (145). If we follow Max Weber and think of science as being like a map, we should bear in mind that maps are never entirely value-free. Weber's observation about maps – that they tell us 'how to get to given place, but [not] where to go' (146) – is misleading because no map is presuppositionless, none shows all possible means to an end (see p. 147).

However, to say that a scientist's choice of explanatory framework is never value free is not to say – as Garfinkel implies – that it is determined by moral or political values. Consider Aristotle's and Darwin's ex-

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planations of why species exist. If Aristotle was attempting to explain why we have the species we do rather than some other species and Darwin was attempting to explain why any species exist at all, they were certainly navigating among different sets of alternatives. But it is hardly plausible to hold that a decision between them would involve a moral or political value judgement. And likewise in the case of the social sciences. Might not the very same values that scientists employ when discriminating between explanatory frameworks such as Aristotle's and Darwin's serve to discriminate between social theories?

Part of the problem here may be Garfinkel's own interpretation of Weber's analogy. There may be no such thing as a presuppositionless map, but why think that only such a map 'would be truly value free, would have to make no ... "arbitrary" choices' (146)? To show that maps display 'selectivity and relativity to purposes' (ibid.) is not to show that the map-maker has 'a truncated or deformed sense of possibility' (cf. p. 145), still less that it depends on moral or political values. Also Garfinkel may have been led astray by his view that knowledge which can be used ed to good or ill is ipso facto value laden (see p. 137). This cannot be correct, or the existence of scientific jokes would make science 'humour laden' as well.

But even if social theory is not value laden, there can be no doubt that individualism has important moral and political consequences. If we take social phenomena to be explicable in terms of rudimentary kinds of interactions between individuals, we shall attribute social ills to character flaws and we shall attempt to remedy them by changing individuals while leaving the prevailing institutions intact. We shall, for instance, see the problem of poverty and unemployment as a problem having to do with the nature of the poor and the unemployed rather than with the social structures that force a certain number of people to be poor and unemployed.[6] Individualists go wrong not because they have no place in their account for social structure (although it is true that they rarely give it much attention). Their mistake is to focus on how individuals behave in highly artificial situations, whereas what is required is an examination of how they behave in highly complex social organizations. The crucial point, underemphasized by Garfinkel, is that as a rule social change can be brought about neither by changing individuals nor by modifying rudimentary structural constraints, but only by improving or replacing already existing social arrangements. This,

6 At its worst, this kind of individualistic thinking leads to horrifying suggestions such as the proposal – which appeared in 1967 in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* – that rioters be given psychosurgery (see p. 154).

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moreover, has nothing to do with the pragmatics of explanation; it is rather a fact about how societies work.

Finally, in regard to the practical consequences of individualism, it is worth stressing two important observations that Garfinkel makes. Firstly, there need be no significant differences between individuals who behave in significantly different ways. The factors that result in an individual's occupying a particular social position may as be trivial as the factors that result in a particular molecule's being precipitated as part of the residue of a supersaturated solution (cf. p. 123). In many cases – one need only think of how students are admitted to professional schools – 'if there are not any significant differences, the system will find some, invent some, or elevate some insignificant differences to a decisive role' (124). Secondly, the structuralist point of view 'enables us to make social rules and institutions problematic in a way which the individualist mode does not' (180). Consider trying to decide which individuals should be fired given the structural presupposition that the first in should be the last out. Adopting what Garfinkel calls the 'individualistic problematic' (182), one would take for granted the presupposition or 'law' that governs the situation and simply determine who had joined the company last. But it is also possible that the company's troubles could be alleviated without reducing the work force (e.g. by reassigning some people or by giving workers a greater degree of control over the company's operations) in which case a 'decision not to accept the individualistic problematic (would have actually proved) that it had a false presupposition' (182). Asides such as these, which occur throughout *Forms of Explanation,* seem to me to be at least as important as its general thesis about social explanation.[7]

August, 1982

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7 In writing this article I have benefited from the comments of Hilliard Aronovitch, Henry Laycock and Kai Nielsen.

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