

ON THE PROPER STUDY OF MAN: REFLECTIONS ON METHOD

HANS-HERMANN HOPPE*

It is possible to describe and explain man in naturalistic terms, in the same way as we describe and explain stones, plants, and animals: in the language of physics, chemistry, biology, genetics, neurology, et cetera. Put differently, we can apply the same methods used for the study of stones, plants, and animals for the study of man as well. We can consider and treat man as a physical object like a stone that can be measured in terms of weight, height, volume, mass, density, temperature, shape, et cetera, and that is located and moving around in time and space. Like plants, man is an organism with a metabolism; he grows, lives, reproduces, and dies. And like animals, man is a self-propelling body, equipped with sensory organs and in search of food and sex.

There is nothing wrong with such naturalism, because just like stones, plants, and animals, man is indeed a part of nature and as such shares some commonalities with all other parts. In fact, as in particular the success of physiology and medicine demonstrates, the study of man as a natural—nature-given—object is not only possible but of eminent practical importance.

* Hans-Hermann Hoppe (hoppe@mises.com) is professor emeritus of economics at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, distinguished senior fellow with the Mises Institute, and founder and president of the Property and Freedom Society.

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But a naturalistic account of man, while entirely legitimate, and even if true, must fail to capture the essence of man: what makes man unique and *distinguishes* him from all other things—from stones, plants, and animals. Indeed, any such description would fail in the same way as a description of a painting or a piece of music in terms of physics, chemistry, et cetera would fail to capture the essence of the painting as a painting and the music as music.

Still, especially among natural scientists (as a showcase for their self-assured role as no-nonsense scientists), the view is quite prominent that such a reduction of man to nothing but nature is both possible and desirable, that everything there can (or eventually will) be known about man is the result of the same methods as applied also to stones, plants, and animals. The idea is that man's every physical state, condition, appearance, change, and movement in time and space can ultimately be explained by a complex system of material causes, including various neurological processes. Admittedly, we may not be all that successful in this endeavor at the moment, but it is the only way to go.

However popular this view, it is not difficult to discover its fundamental error and to recognize why this pan-naturalistic program is bound to fail (and why its admitted current “underdevelopment” is not an accident, but a necessary consequence of some false premises).

The error becomes apparent once we reflect on what we are currently doing, I as a speaker or writer and you as a listener or reader—and what any natural scientist must do as well whenever presenting the results of his research. The answer: We speak to each other in meaningful words and sentences. We communicate with other persons with the intention (for the purpose and with the goal) of achieving some sort of coordination or cooperation with other people, and we may succeed or fail in this endeavor.

To be sure, we can give a naturalistic account of some *aspects* of the phenomenon of communication in the same way as we can give a naturalistic account of a painting or a piece of music. There are vocal cords, sounds, scribbles on paper, brain activities, bodily movements, et cetera involved. But there is nothing to be found in any such naturalistic account that would allow us to conclude that these movements, sounds, scribbles, nerves, et cetera have any meaning or purpose and are used by a speaker or writer as

means of communication, whether successfully or not, with some other person(s).

In nature (and in natural evolution) there is nothing purposeful, meaningful, true, false, successful, or unsuccessful. Nature has no purpose. Nature and the laws of nature are what they are, and they work the way they do, unchangingly and unfailingly. Death and dying are not a refutation of a natural law, nor do hurricanes or floods contradict any laws of nature. They are just as much natural events as life and living or calm and droughts. Likewise, plants and animals do not intend to survive and help reproduce their species; they simply do or they don't. The survival and the extinction of a plant or animal species are both natural events, to be explained in naturalistic terms. Survival is not the result of successful planning, nor does extinction indicate faulty planning. In all of nature there is no planning; things simply happen.

Only we—men—have *purposes* in dealing with nature (including other men). Only we transform nature-given materials purposefully into *artifacts* and use such artifacts as means for the attainment of further purposes. Only we use words (and nonverbal symbols) as means—hence *meaningful* sounds or signs—to elicit some definite response from or in other persons. Only manmade material artifacts, then, can be said to be right or wrong, successful or failing—in other words, can be *given human purposes*. And only manmade words and sentences—qua means for the purpose of interpersonal communication—can be said to be meaningful and understood or not; successful or not; and true, false, or indeterminate.

Accordingly, every natural scientist—whether biologist, physiologist, chemist, geneticist, or neurologist—who claims that man can be reduced to nothing but nature becomes entangled in a contradiction.

On the *one* hand, the “man” this scientist speaks and writes about—man-as-nature (which he claims to be the only “man” there is)—has no purpose and no meaning, and nothing about *its* inner workings is true or false, successful or failing. Everything works the way it does in accordance with unchanging and unfailing causal laws. And yet, on the *other* hand, *he*, the very scientist, who obviously counts himself as a member of the class of “man,” follows a *purpose* in conducting his research on man-as-nature. *He* conducts purposeful operations and uses artifacts as means to desired ends,

and he must employ meaningful sentences to describe the methods and results of his research concerning “an-sich” meaningless natural materials, phenomena, and processes. *He* claims these methods to be correct rather than incorrect and his results to be true rather than false or inconclusive. And for *him*, then, in contrast to man-as-nature, death and bodily malfunctions, for instance, *do* have meaning and are indeed *failures* and *malfunctions*. Yet they have meaning and are failures or malfunctions only *insofar as they are related to a human purpose*: the purpose of wanting to preserve life and health (as something “good”) and to prevent illness and death (as something “bad”).

Hence, we can conclude that the pan-naturalistic research program according to which man can and is to be exclusively and exhaustively described and explained in terms of the natural sciences and natural causes cannot be formulated and expressed in words and sentences claiming to be meaningful and true without running into an inescapable contradiction.

LANGUAGE, MEANING, PURPOSE, AND ACTION

With this introductory observation we have already reached several important philosophical insights that I shall now try to explicate in some more detail.

For one, with language we have identified the necessary starting point of all philosophizing. We cannot philosophize without being able to speak (and write) and to listen (and read). Indeed, this cannot be denied at pain of contradiction, because the denial itself would have to come in the form of words and sentences. Hence, we have reached here a first insight about man to be considered a priori true. (Incidentally, Mises’s [1998] *Human Action* also begins with meaningful words and sentences.)

Moreover, with language recognized as a means of interpersonal communication, any and all charges of solipsism or atomism directed against Austro-libertarians (and generally against all proponents of a methodological individualism) are revealed as completely misplaced. Language is a social institution. Indeed, as the later Ludwig Wittgenstein, of the *Philosophical Investigations*, has convincingly demonstrated, the idea of a “private”—rather than a

common or public—language is inconceivable. Language serves the purpose of interpersonal coordination and cooperation, and for that purpose it must be common and public. In fact, it is learned by little people (babies, who first cannot act and speak at all) in cooperation and interaction with grown-up people, in what Wittgenstein (1953) has appropriately described as “language games.” Indeed, man develops into a self-conscious individual—a *persona*—only in cooperation with other persons, through a process of socialization.

In distinct contrast, an infant abandoned by his parents but miraculously surviving reared by animals, whether wolves or monkeys, will not, should he reenter human society later on, come back with a language. He will come back speaking no language at all (nor will he be able to communicate with wolves or monkeys), which belies all talk about a language “instinct” and about the “brain” creating language. Rather, provided his cognitive development has not been stifled for too long by the absence of any human society, he will have to slowly and painstakingly learn a language in order to turn from the human animal that he had become into a human person. And the language he will have to learn is not, and never has been for anyone who ever learned to speak any language, some “universal language” generated by some underlying “universal grammar,” as the naturalistic “instinct” or “brain” theory of language would lead one to expect, but will be and always has been a *particular* language spoken by a particular community of native speakers. This confirms the insight already reached before: that meaningful speech and language, while certainly having a physiological basis (vocal cords, neurological processes, etc.), are nonetheless *not* products of nature and natural causes, but products of human *culture*—that is, of man’s intentional and purposeful interference with and artificial alteration of nature.

Further, we recognize that a methodological *dualism*, rather than a pan-naturalism (or materialism, monism, etc.), has to be adopted from the outset. While all methods applicable to stones, plants, and animals are also applicable to man, not all methods applicable to man are also applicable to stones, plants, and animals.

We can speak in common words with other persons to coordinate our conduct. We know why we do or say what we are doing or saying; and we know (or know how to find out) why other people do and

say what they are doing and saying. We also know (or know how to find out) whether we have understood or come to an agreement with each other. Furthermore, whatever we do or say is ascribed or imputed to whoever did or said it, and this person is held to be accountable and responsible for what he did or said. None of this is true of stones, plants, or animals, notwithstanding some protestation from certain friends of animals (of which, incidentally, I am one).

We can speak to stones, plants, or animals as much and as long as we want, of course, but we cannot communicate with them. Our words may even have some physical effect on the material world. But there are no grounds whatsoever to assume that our words are *understood* by any stone, plant, or animal, that the effect of those words, whatever it may be, is not due solely to some trained yet natural stimulus-response behavior. Thus, for instance, we can train certain animals to perform, upon presentation of certain verbal or gesticular cues, some tricks that are “unnatural” yet possible, given the animal’s physical endowment. Yet this has nothing to do with a meaningful answer or response by a horse or dog to a meaningful request from the horse or dog trainer; it is an entirely natural process to be explained causally. To impute to stones, plants, and animals purposes and the selection and use of nature-given materials as means to achieve such purposes is a form of animism, shamanism, or anthropomorphism.

True, it is quite popular to ascribe to animals all sorts of attributes that we have learned how to use and understand in our communication and cooperation with other persons: dogs are said to be sad or happy, obedient or rebellious, thinking and listening, learning, in love, and communicating, for instance; and birds and beavers are described as engineers of nests and dams. However, any such ascriptions are, strictly speaking, just metaphorical. We cannot communicate with animals and understand why they do what they do in the same way as we can communicate with and understand other persons. With animals (not to speak of stones and plants) we are left entirely with causal explanations (or explanations by instincts). They behave the way they do because as pieces of nature they can do no other than what they do; and hence, we do not hold animals any more accountable or responsible for their behavior than we hold plants or stones.¹

¹ Two brief asides: There are people who claim to speak and communicate with some animals, such as chimpanzees, but I have not yet heard of anyone whose children

Moreover, as possibly the most important insight implied in the above is the fact that philosophizing must begin with speaking in common words, the relationship between speaking (language) and acting (action) is in need of further explication.

All speech and communication are actions, but not all action is communication. Like all action, communication is a motivated, purposeful activity. It aims at an anticipated goal. Like any other activity, it is, in the words of Ludwig von Mises (1998, 13–14), motivated by “felt uneasiness” and aimed at “improvement.” It expresses, like every action, an actor’s value judgment, and reveals his preference. The actor values the goal aimed at, and he prefers to bring about this goal rather than another one. Like any other activity, then, speaking and communicating involve opportunity costs. A person can use his body and time for other things than talking, writing, listening, or reading. Like all action, communication takes place in time and space. It has a beginning, some duration, and an end. It involves, like every action, the purposeful employment of scarce physical means (at a minimum the human body and the space it occupies). Like all action, communication, too, involves some interference with the “natural” course of events (the course that would have resulted, without active intervention) in order to bring about another, preferred state of affairs. The speaker (or writer) must use physical means (vocal cords, hands, paper and pencil, etc.) in accordance with some plan or recipe to produce meaningful sounds, signs, or symbols, so as to make himself heard and understood by the listener (or reader). And as in all action, so also for communication: the means (words, language) chosen and the recipes applied to them can turn out right or wrong, suitable or unsuitable for the end sought, and the communication can be deemed successful or unsuccessful.

were raised with and learned a language in communication with these animals. And as for animals qua purposeful engineers: birds and beavers always do the very same thing, again and again from one generation to the next, but taken out of their natural habitat they are regularly unable to survive. That does not sound much like an engineer. Man, by contrast, is capable of creating new instruments for new goals, he can adjust to and survive in practically all environments, no matter how different they are, and he can do increasingly many things exceeding his nature-given abilities, like flying in the air (in an airplane) and moving under water (in a submarine), for instance.

But not all action is communication. In fact, as just mentioned, communicating with other persons has opportunity costs. Matters are different from person to person, of course, but typically we spend far more time in our daily activities doing things silently: doing things with things (nonpersons) rather than talking. Indeed, even the purpose of communicative actions—of our words directed to others—is often *not* to have a conversation with someone else, but instead to give or receive practical instructions on how to do certain things quietly and in silence in one's material surroundings.

We shall call such silent acts performed to bring about some specific end within the material world *instrumental* actions (in contrast to *communicative* actions, which shall be analyzed subsequently).

INSTRUMENTAL ACTIONS AND NATURAL LAWS

Instrumental actions are the foundation of our entire material civilization. Every house, street, car, and factory, every hammer, nail, and brick, et cetera, is the result of (successful) instrumental action—of engineering, if you will. Most animals and plants in our surroundings are also the result of instrumental action—that is, of the intentional breeding, training, and cultivation of animals and plants in accordance with various human purposes or ends. In fact, today there is hardly any raw nature or any “wilderness” left at all. Rather, practically everything around us is a purposefully manufactured instrument or artifice (i.e., human *culture*, whether in the form of agriculture, animal husbandry, or the construction of inanimate objects and materials).

And instrumental action is also the basis of all natural sciences. All sciences, from logic to geometry, arithmetic, physics, chemistry, biology, physiology, and medicine, find their origin in everyday life. In learning how to follow simple or complex demands, children come to learn the meaning of “and” and “or,” of “one,” “some,” and “all”—of logical junctors (or connectives) and quantifiers, respectively—and hence the elementary rules of conclusive reasoning. Craftsmen, traders, engineers, technicians, tinkerers, healers, planters, and breeders, in order to reach their various instrumental goals, have learned how to measure space and time (duration); how to weigh; how to count; how to shape; how to distinguish,

mix, combine, or separate various materials (whether inanimate or animate); and how to compare sizes, time spans, weights, volumes, numbers, forms, and shapes. “Science” does nothing but grow out of and build on top of the achievements accomplished by craftsmen and artists (in the widest sense of this term) in everyday life. The only (yet highly important) addition “science” brings is the standardization of all measuring instruments, such as yardsticks or clocks for length and time, for instance. This means that they are constructed and operated according to the same norm or recipe, and because of this they deliver “data” that are true or valid independent of any particular actor (i.e., trans—or intersubjectively true and valid). Every actor, confronted with the same task or problem, is thus supposed to come to the same measurement results (barring, of course, some possible malfunctioning of the measuring instrument). In fact, even simple sense observations involve active interference with nature and the making of distinctions and measurements. Observations also can be wrong, imprecise, or deceptive. For an observation to aspire to the rank of a “scientific” observation, the observer must explicitly state the conditions he has arranged (and has fulfilled) before making his observation, so that the same observation could in principle be reproduced by any other observer following the same observation rules (where and how to stand, what to look for and how, et cetera).

Contrary to the image many scientists have of their own activity (and its importance), then, engineering, technology, and manufacturing are not “applied” sciences and hence of some lower rank and dignity than the “pure” sciences. Matters are exactly the other way around. What comes methodologically first, and what makes science as we know it possible and provides its ultimate foundation, is human construction and engineering. There would be no science and no scientific data as we know them without measuring rods, clocks, planes, rectangles, scales, counters, lenses, microscopes, telescopes, X ray and ultrasound machines, and on and on. As the late, great German philosopher-scientist Peter Janich (2015) bluntly put it: craftsmanship comes before wordsmanship. And based on this insight into the priority of craftsmanship, of technics and engineering vis-à-vis all “theory,” we can also safely dismiss as totally unrealistic the specter of a complete breakdown of our entire system of knowledge, as the highly popular “falsificationist” philosophy of

Karl Popper (2013) found to be possible (as not to be ruled out). Contra Popper's falsificationism—as well as the relativisms propagated by such prominent figures as Thomas Kuhn, Willard Van Orman Quine, and Paul Feyerabend, for instance—no falsification of any hypothetical natural law whatsoever, and no seemingly irresolvable scientific controversy regarding incompatible paradigms or rival interpretations of scientific data, would ever leave us completely empty-handed or on shaky ground. We can always fall back and firmly rely on our “protoscientific” knowledge, acquired and successfully practiced day in and day out in our everyday life as craftsmen (as men working with silent materials).

So-called natural laws, then, do not really concern raw nature and processes in raw nature. Rather, natural laws are general practical or technical rules or recipes for arranging initial conditions within the material world—some specified experimental arrangement or specific constellation and operation of standardized measuring instruments or technical devices—which, left alone and without any further intervention, will always lead to the same desired result. The generality and the universality of such laws, then, are not hypothetical or in need of any inductive support, as is commonly held. Rather, they are implied in the very fact that all procedures and all applicable objects or settings for such procedures are described in impersonal—trans—or intersubjective—terms, so as to be reproducible at will by anyone.

The truth or validity of natural laws, then, cannot be located in any supposed “correspondence” of a scientist's statements with reality—that is, of words with things. This is because the claim of a correspondence of his propositions with nature is itself just an assertion (words), and the “correspondence theory of truth” may be a nice word definition of truth, but it provides no criterion whatsoever on how to decide between different and rival correspondence claims by various scientists (and is hence useless). The truth claims of natural scientists are not validated by other propositions (such as the assertion of some correspondence) leading ultimately into an infinite regress of propositional justifications, but by successful action and reproduction within the material world (of stones, plants, and animals). Truth and true propositions are the intellectual means of achieving practical success—given specific human purposes. And any failure of achieving some specified goal is not a falsification

of nature and its lawlike behavior; instead, it reveals some human error in need of repair. Either the action recipe was not followed correctly and in the right order (as when a schnitzel cook first fries the meat and only then adds the coating [*panade*] and accordingly misses his goal), and hence, the recipe must be stated more clearly; or else the various measuring instruments, apparatuses, or technical devices employed in one's scientific endeavors are faulty and do not serve the purpose for which they were constructed. But the devices are not faulty by nature—an elastic measuring rod or a defective calculator or clock, for instance, is just as much a part of nature as a rigid measuring rod or a well-functioning calculator or clock—and there is no way to determine by the methods available to the natural scientist whether an instrument is faulty. He can compare the instruments in naturalistic terms—he can compare one measuring rod, calculator, or clock with another—but such a comparison does not reveal which of them, if any, is faulty. This can only be determined by the natural scientist insofar as he (unlike nature) has human purposes and can test in practice whether the devices serve his purposes or not.

COMMUNICATIVE ACTIONS, *BEGREIFEN*, AND VERSTEHEN

While the instrumental actions that provide the basis of our entire material culture as well as of all natural sciences are silent actions, and instrumental success (or failure) can also be determined in silence by an actor (independently of what other people say or do, alone and for himself), such actions, as already noted, are typically learned in communication and cooperation with other persons and are, even if performed in silence, intelligible events that can be described in terms of some public language.

As we turn our attention at last to communicative action, the subject matter of the so-called social sciences, a few general remarks should be made at the outset. Communicative action is a person's use of meaningful words, sentences, or symbols—of a common public language—directed at some other person(s) with the purpose of affecting or changing their conduct and/or their reality perception in some desired direction. While the meaning of a "change in conduct" requires no further explanation, the

intimately related notion of a “change in reality perception” deserves more attention.

In learning a native language in Wittgensteinian language games, wherein the correct and common use of words and sentences is trained and exercised by the successful performance of certain actions, and the exercise of actions in turn is corrected by the use of certain words, people acquire some largely (if not entirely) common reality perception (Wittgenstein 1953). We all, even small children, safely and reliably distinguish between stones, plants, and animals qua natural or nature-given objects. We can also safely and reliably distinguish between natural things on the one hand and instruments and artifices on the other. All instruments—and, more generally, all means—such as a hammer, a spoon, a car, a cigarette, a pencil, et cetera, are real things and part of our common reality, but they are not raw nature, and they can be recognized and identified as a hammer, a spoon, et cetera only insofar as we (men) can assign a human purpose to them. Without “subjective” human purposes, no hammer, spoon, et cetera would exist—or, rather, no “objective” thing could ever be identified as a hammer or a spoon.

Most importantly, however, in acquiring a language and a common reality perception, we also come to know about the existence of “social” facts and institutions—that is, facts and institutions concerning the relations between man and man (rather than between man and nature). The most fundamental social institution, of course, is a common language itself, as a means of communicating and coordinating one’s actions with those of other persons. Yet along with language, which provides the basis for the creation of all other social facts and institutions, we also learn about facts and institutions such as several property, commodities, exchange, sales, money, prices, contracts, promises, greetings, praise and blame, marriage, divorce, parenthood, family, relatives, firms, clubs, associations, employers and employees, superiors and subordinates, appointments and dismissals, and on and on. All of these facts and institutions also have some expression or trace in the material world, just as meaningful words have some material/physical carrier aspect. But like meaningful words, none of these facts and institutions are part of reality in the same way as are raw nature or material instruments. Rather, as the meaning of words, they all concern, define, constitute, or regulate interpersonal

relationships, and they would all disappear from reality if there were no community of communicating and cooperating men (and the number, range, and variety of such facts and institutions would successively narrow down as a speech community became smaller).

More precisely, then, we can define language now as a means of talking to other persons in order to coordinate our actions within a common reality—that is, a reality perceived in largely, if not entirely, identical terms, made up of raw nature, manufactured things and instruments, and social facts and institutions. The most important institution after language is that of property, of determining mine and thine.

Our terms thus circumscribed, and even before we analyze the truth claims associated with communicative actions and the methods of validating them in any more detail, one general, seemingly surprising observation immediately springs to mind. The achievements of the social sciences are often belittled or even ridiculed, and in view of much if not most of contemporary academic sociology and economics, this assessment is certainly well deserved. Yet this should not blind us from noticing a rather obvious fact: if language and speaking are and do for us in the social world (made up of other people and their actions) what engineering is and does for us in the world of stones, plants, animals (and manmade implements and their behavior or functioning), then we must come to the conclusion that we are actually quite successful as social engineers (wordsmiths), as people effecting coordination and cooperation by means of speech.

And we can also easily identify a reason for this success. We know more about other people than we can ever know about stones, plants, and animals. We know, for instance, that a person's movements in space and time are not natural (and as such unintelligible) events resulting from material causes (of which no one can ever know why they work the way they do), but instead have a reason: they have a beginning and an end and involve a person's purposeful selection of certain things as means in the pursuit of personal ends. In contrast to our experience with nature, then, we can *begreifen* (grasp) human movements—including the movement of not moving—as (ex ante) rational, goal-directed activities. (In *Human Action* Mises (1998, 51) used the terms "conception" and "conceptual cognition" instead of

the more appropriate German noun and verb *Begreifen* and *begreifen* from his original German work to refer to how we comprehend the universal features of all actions.) And all of economics—or, rather, praxeology—is something that can be *begriffen* (grasped).

Above and beyond *begreifen* (grasping) what all human actions have in common, we can also understand—*verstehen*—the *unique*, individual, or personal reasons and purposes of some specific actor, say Peter, and distinguish them from those of another, say Paul. (In contrast, we cannot understand stones, plants, or animals; and hence, of course, the behavior of one stone or one member of some specified plant or animal species or subspecies, subjected to the same conditions, treatments, or trainings, cannot be distinguished from the behavior of another member of its kind—whereas the conduct of Peter and Paul can be clearly distinguished, even if they perform phenomenologically identical actions under identical conditions.)

Now, looking more closely at communicative actions—and our reflective *speaking about* communicative action (which is itself a communicative action, and indeed that sort in which I have been engaged here all along)—in order to clarify their epistemological status, we immediately notice that interpersonal communication can have a great variety of purposes and a correspondingly great variety of successes and of failures.

My own purpose here in this endeavor, for instance, is to present an intelligible sequence of arguments that can, in principle, be followed, rethought, and recapitulated independently by everyone, so as to bring about a common reality perception regarding a certain subject matter. Yet time is scarce, and every action has its opportunity cost, and so most human communication actually serves other purposes than arguing for the truth of some propositions. We use words or meaningful signs to call on someone or draw attention to something. We use words to command, to warn, to ask, to explain, to greet, to apologize, to promise, to offer, to chat, to tell a story or a joke, and for countless other purposes.

Accordingly, the success (or failure) of a communicative action aimed at coordination can take many forms, and yet in every case it depends on a twofold accomplishment: the understanding of the speech's propositional content *and* the acceptance of its purpose and modus of proposing it.

Coordination is successful if I ask you to bring me a banana and you bring me one, or if I greet you and you greet me back. It is unsuccessful if you don't know the meaning of "banana" or "bring" or the social institution of "greeting"—and you show me a teddy bear instead, or you respond to my request or my greeting by saying, for instance, "I am sixty years old" (indicating that you haven't understood the purpose of my speech act). Likewise, coordination is unsuccessful if you understand what I say but reject my proposal and reply, for example, "I don't take orders from you" or "I have no time," or simply walk away from me.

Moreover, and importantly, unsuccessful coordination (discoordination) can take two possible forms or outcomes: simple *disappointment* or serious *conflict*. After you (disappointingly) walk away from my request or fail to return my greeting (and my speech act has failed), we both go about our daily business as before, I with the means under my control and you with the means under your control. A case of *disappointment*.

A *conflict* results, if, instead of bringing me a banana or returning my greeting (successful communication) or walking away from me (disappointing communication), you respond, for example, by taking a book out of my hand against my protestations or by pulling my hair. Conflict also results if I respond to your disappointing refusal of my request by grabbing your coat or following you against your protestations into your house (the house previously under your undisputed control). In both cases, we clash, because we want to employ the very same scarce means—the hair, the coat, the house, a knife—for incompatible purposes. Because of the scarcity of physical means, only one person's purpose can be realized and fulfilled. We must clash.

As already noted, far more communication is successful, both in being understood and in being accepted for what it is, than not. And if communication is not successful and fails to reach its end of interpersonal coordination, these failures are mostly mere disappointments (which can nonetheless be disastrous, of course—just think of a bankruptcy due to a lack of buyers of goods offered for sale). Failed communication in the form of conflict is a comparatively rare occurrence (its notoriety is derived from this rarity). By and large, we are amazingly successful as speakers in bringing about coordination.

Moreover, even if communicative action sometimes fails to attain coordination, we have a *method* of improving our communication. On the one hand (as for the propositional content of our speech act), to reduce failure we can add to our vocabulary and learn to make the meaning of our words and sentences clearer and more precise. And on the other hand (as for the modus and purpose of our speech), we can learn how to better understand established social institutions and to convey the appropriateness or legitimacy of our speaking in the mode we do under given circumstances, and so increase the likelihood of acceptance and successful coordination. In learning how to speak better by improving our command of language and the usages to which language can be put, we increase the likelihood that our actions result in coordination and hence are successful.²

Even in the comparatively rare case of conflicts—physical clashes—we have learned a method of conflict resolution in everyday life: namely, argumentation. Conflicts (rather than mere disappointments) are the result of rival or incompatible claims to the same thing—that is, they are property disputes: Is this thing mine or thine? To resolve such disputes, the institution of a public trial of arguments has been established, the purpose of which is to replace conflict with peaceful interaction.

Within the Austrolibertarian intellectual tradition, following largely in the footsteps of Murray Rothbard, an elaborate system of property rights has been worked out, the implementation of which could, in principle, help avoid all conflict and be consulted as a

² Of course, not every person is equally capable regarding command of language as a tool to the end of interpersonal coordination. There are “masters” of language, who can use words to bring people to do almost anything; express, find, or invent expression for almost everything; and know how to select the correct (coordination-reaching) words under almost any circumstance. There are others, at the other extreme, such as autistic people or persons with Asperger’s syndrome, whose command of speech and speech acts, and hence their ability to successfully interact with other people, is extremely limited. Matters in this regard (i.e., in the area of social engineering) are not fundamentally different from those in the field of nature engineering. Here, too, we have “master” engineers, who can manufacture and know how to repair almost anything, every tool and every machine. And we have people who cannot draw a straight line or hit a nail in the wall. But everyone who can act at all (i.e., every *person*) can do both *some* engineering (i.e., purposeful transforming of nature) and *some* communicating (i.e., transforming the social world and moving other people by means of words or signs to do certain things).

guideline in any actual case of conflict. I have myself extensively written on this subject, yet in this essay the emphasis shall be on positive rather than normative issues, and I will return to the topic of conflict resolution by means of argumentation only briefly at the very end of my present reflections.

SOCIAL LAWS IMPOSSIBLE – *VERSTEHEN*

Regarding truth claims connected with communicative actions and propositions concerning such actions, then, we land again at the success (or failure) of an action as the ultimate and decisive criterion of truth (or falsity), even if the situation here turns out significantly differently from the case of the success (or failure) of an instrumental action. If a speaker (or writer) has reached his goal and his addressee(s) respond as desired, we can say that his recipe of words was true, given his specific purpose and situation. And a proposition regarding a person's communicative actions can in principle be validated as true by that person's assent to or confirmation of the description of his own acts given by the proponent (provided that this personal witness is not lying or intent upon deceiving other people concerning his purposes—which contingency the proponent would have learned how to rule out based on some public evidence).

The crucial question regarding communicative actions is (and has been seemingly forever), however, whether there can be social laws in the same sense of "law" that we can speak of regarding natural laws. That is to say, can we formulate rules or recipes of speaking (or writing) that, if applied under identical conditions—that is, conditions expressed in impersonal or trans-subjective terms (so as to be reproducible or replicable by other people)—will always bring about the same response from the addressee(s)?

Based on what has already been explained, my answer to this question cannot be in any doubt. Even if many so-called social scientists believe in such laws and are diligently in search of them, the entire endeavor is misconceived and doomed to failure from the outset. And the fundamental reason for the impossibility of any social laws has already been identified. It is the fact that humans can mutually understand—*verstehen*—each other and, based on

such an understanding, recognize each other and each other's respective actions as *unique* and different from all others and all others' actions. Accordingly, it is impossible for a social scientist to ever do what the natural scientist, quasi-naturally, does: describe the if-clause and the then-clause of his propositions in naturalistic or "objective" terms—in terms of some experimental arrangement of various material objects or their measurement by some standardized measuring instruments.

Even if the social scientist manages to arrange identical external conditions—of natural and artificial objects as well as of other people—surrounding a given actor, and even if all the naturalistic characteristic of the actor (weight, height, age, etc.) are controlled for (held constant), different persons—Peter and Paul—still remain recognizably different study objects; and hence, no general and generalizable if-clause exists. The reason is that a person's each and every action is fundamentally and ultimately driven by his personal value judgments: by the subjective value he attaches to his various potential goals and, more specifically, to his subjective preference or rank order of and among such (time-wise) competing or rival (anticipated) goals at any given point in time—and that we do not, and never will, possess an instrument satisfying the "scientific" measurement requirement of "trans-subjectivity" mentioned above that would allow us to "scientifically" measure and compare the values and preference orders of different persons. Values and preferences are (like purposes) not part of the "objective," external world, and there are no such things as units of value or of utility or degrees of preference. Therefore, as we are unable to assure the identity, or sameness, of initial conditions (the if-clause) for different actors, no general social law producing a reliable then-clause is possible.

This insight is affirmed as well by a look at the presumed then-clause of alleged social laws. Even if different actors, acting under the same external conditions, perform the same communicative actions (from a naturalistic or phenomenological point of view), and even if they equally consider their actions successful (because the addressee(s) of their communication responded as hoped for), this does not mean that their results are actually the same. This is because these results, whatever they are, are subjectively evaluated, too, and not only by the initial speakers but by the respondents as

well. The same success may be evaluated, weighted, or assessed quite differently by different people, it may have different effects on their personal value scales, and it may lead them to different conclusions regarding their subsequent, future actions. Thus, again, because we are unable to assure the sameness (identity) of the result, no general then-clause can be formulated—as would be required for a law.

As far as instrumental actions—that is, our purposeful operations with nature and natural materials (including plants, animals, and human bodies)—are concerned, the meaning and implication of success and failure are always clear and unambiguous. Instrumental success means: given the same external circumstances and the same manufacturing or engineering purposes, apply the very same recipe again; and instrumental failure means: do not use the same recipe for the same purpose again. Indeed, to proceed otherwise and try a failed recipe again in the hope that the results next time may come out different would qualify you as an “idiot,” according to the definition of this term widely ascribed to Albert Einstein.

But none of this applies to communicative action—that is, the talking of man to man. Here, both the success and the failure of a person’s communication with his addressee(s) involve a change within the social world, and this change in turn may effect a change in the subjective value scales and preference orders of different people. In short, the personal situation changes over time; there is no reason to assume that what worked and led to success today must necessarily do so again tomorrow, and there is nothing outright idiotic in trying again today or tomorrow a talking recipe that has failed in the past. That is, we can never rest on our past laurels as communicators but must continuously update and refresh our understanding—*verstehen*—of other persons in order to (hopefully) succeed again in our communication with them the next time.

Moreover, and more generally still, regardless of whether we are considering silent instrumental actions or talkative communicative actions, it holds for all human actions (including my own) that they can never be predicted in the same way that it is possible to predict the behavior of stones, plants, and animals, or of the human body. The simple reason for this is the undeniable fact that we can both learn, and communicate what we have learned, to other persons.

No scientist, whether of nature or society, can deny this ability; not only is it demonstrated by the way in which we all acquired a common native language (and the knowledge about the world contained in this language), but more specifically, the entire *raison d'être* of every researcher, regardless of his particular subject matter, is to experience and learn something about reality that he has not already experienced and known before. Yet obviously, no researcher (and no actor) can predict in advance what new experiences and knowledge his research will bring to light until he has actually done that research (otherwise, why bother?). No one can know today, or at any given point in time, what he will know at a later point in time or, accordingly, what he will do or say on the basis of this later knowledge. The prediction always comes too late. Einstein, for instance, could not have predicted and explained the theory of relativity until he had actually formulated it. Steve Jobs could not have predicted and explained the recipe for constructing an Apple computer until he actually had it and had applied it. And there existed no Mona Lisa before Leonardo da Vinci had actually painted it. The class of human actions, then, is an open class, with an indeterminate number of elements. We know some of them, but we do not know all potential actions (just as we know some words and meaningful expressions, but we do not and never will know all potential words or expressions ever to be used).

So the prediction of human actions is definitely not a “science” as typically conceived. But, as our everyday experiences confirm over and over again, it is also not haphazard guesswork. It is, if you will, entrepreneurship, in the widest sense of this term. Throughout our lives we try to successfully adjust to our surroundings—made up of raw nature; manmade materials; bred, tamed, and trained plants and animals; and other people—and the changes in our surroundings. As far as instrumental actions are concerned, we are not infallible, of course, but we can achieve a relatively high degree of certainty; and technical improvements and innovations are predictably swiftly imitated and adopted by other people. As far as communicative actions are concerned, however, our predictions concern the response of other people capable of learning and are thus always more speculative and subject to a higher degree of uncertainty.

Yet, as mentioned before, we have and know of a method to reduce this uncertainty: all responses are responses to be ascribed

to some particular actor(s), and we are capable, in principle, of understanding—*verstehen*—each and every person and why—for what reason and to what purpose—he does what he does (or has done in the past).

The premier method of *verstehen*, as indicated before, is the acquisition of a common language. It is obviously more difficult to understand and predict the actions of our fellow men if we do not share the same language than if we do. To share a language is to see the world in roughly similar terms, and this helps significantly in making sense of the conduct of other people. This instrument of *verstehen* is by no means perfect: Some people are more successful in understanding others and can make and discern more and finer distinctions, whether in and of words or of actions, than can others. And the social institution of a common language itself is not rigidly “given,” but can undergo considerable, even if typically slow and largely marginal, changes in the course of time. However, no one can do entirely without language, and even the dullest of persons is capable of some basic understanding of others. Moreover, the repeated understanding—*verstehende*—observation of and communication and cooperation with a particular person helps us form a concept of the person’s *character* or personality type: besides the most obvious types of male and female, there are those of the introvert or the extrovert, the clumsy or the clever, the timid or the daring, the dull and lazy or the curious and ambitious, the hedonist or the acquisitive, the opportunistic or the principled, et cetera. These and other personality types are not always sharply distinguished from each other, and the character of a person can and may change over time. But for the time being—for the short and intermediate run (that may well last forever)—the understanding of another person’s character adds some degree of (temporary) constancy and confidence to our deliberations, because it somewhat delineates a person’s likely range of conduct and thus helps us better predict his future action.

Along with the acquisition of a common language comes our understanding of property, the second most important social institution. Even as little children we learn to distinguish between mine and thine, between things that belong to me (or my parents) and things that belong to others. No society, unless reverting to some animalistic struggle for survival, can do without this institution. The social institution of several or private property, like that of

language, is not fixed once and for all, but changeable and subject to potential future changes. It is disputes concerning property—Is this mine or yours? May I or may I not do this with such and such?—that are at the bottom of all conflicts. In any case, the social institution of property is, if you will, a “conservative” institution that typically undergoes only slow, gradual, or incremental changes (except for the rare event of some violent revolution). To know what quantity and quality of things a given person can call his own (i.e., his property), then, and what other members of his surrounding speech community are calling theirs, is of significant help in predicting his future actions. This is because a person’s quantity and quality of property exercises some rather strict constraints on his range of possible future actions.

Last but not least, people typically spend a considerable amount of time performing functions or playing roles learned within a multitude of other social institutions. We act in the roles of parents, husbands and wives, children, uncles and aunts, policemen, teachers, students, doctors, waiters, salesmen, businessmen, brokers, bankers, members of chess or football clubs, priests, popes, presidents, kings, et cetera. None of these roles or functions are rigidly defined: different roles can be assumed by one person at different times (and some roles can be assumed simultaneously); some institutions, roles, and functions may become obsolete; new roles and functions can be established; and, of course, people can sometimes fall out of their roles and fail in the performance of their assumed functions. Yet none of this changes the basic fact that the predictability of another person’s future actions is greatly enhanced once the current roles played and functions performed by this person are known. Invariably, there remains an element of uncertainty, and every role and function leaves some room for personal interpretation. But every role and function also entails some general rules, routines, and standards, and the prediction of the conduct of people identified as exercising certain roles or functions, then, is often little more than a matter of routine.

Based on the knowledge acquired by means—per method—of *verstehen* and its various indicated aspects and techniques, then, social scientists can come up with seemingly endless lists of “aggregate statistics” of this or that group of people having said or done a certain thing in certain situations with a particular frequency

right now or over time; and then statistical associations, time series, correlations, and cross-correlations found between various social phenomena or statistical constructs. Some of these “research” results are little more than momentary snapshots, already irrelevant and obsolete tomorrow. Some are plain trivial, such that everyone on the street already knew the results before having them presented by some “researcher.” Some results (and it appears increasingly more) are mere fabrications, fake and fraudulent, in order *not* to enlighten the public but instead to purposefully deceive it (whether at others’ orders, for money, or out of personal conviction). But *verstehen*-based social research can also bring to light (and sometimes does, even in an increasingly censorious social research environment) important and surprising results (including, for instance, the massive amount of fraud committed and commissioned in the present age in the name of “science”) and genuinely enlighten the public regarding long-running social trends and developments or slow and gradually changing social patterns—that is, social facts that cannot be altered instantly or by sheer will but are of great practical importance and relevance for all men *qua* entrepreneurs to know and to take into account in their preparations for the future and their own future conduct.

Still, even the most enlightening results that the (empirical) social sciences have brought to light, or will in the future, should never be considered *laws* (whether of the deterministic or the probabilistic kind). They are—and they can never be anything but—insights regarding *unique* historical events, correlations, developments, trends, tendencies, or patterns.

APODICTIC KNOWLEDGE OF MAN—*BEGREIFEN*

Yet, apart from all *verstehen*-based empirical social research concerning history and historical events or developments, we (everyday—men as well as professional social scientists) have one additional method available for making sense of the social world—indeed, a method that can yield knowledge of even greater certainty (without claiming infallibility) than that associated with or attributed to any natural law. I briefly mentioned the topic of *begreifen* (conceptual analysis) before. We do not know, and never

will know, why nature works the way it does. It just does. Yet we know more about man than about any natural thing.

We know that man does what he does for a reason and with a purpose (i.e., with some anticipated future state of affairs in mind); we know that whatever man qua entrepreneur does, he does with means he thinks to be suitable to reach some ends; and we know all of this with apodictic certainty (or a priori), insofar as we cannot possibly dispute such knowledge without thereby affirming its truth (in that its denial is itself a purposeful, goal-directed action). And while we can never “scientifically” predict the specific *content* of our own or our fellow men’s future actions—that is, our specific choices of ends and means in a continuously changing environment—we can (as just demonstrated), based on our aprioristic knowledge concerning the *formal* structure of all human action, deduce an impressive number of equally aprioristic (universally valid) conclusions. These conclusions are either directly implied in the concept of action, or else they are conclusions reached indirectly, in conjunction with explicitly stated initial empirical (and empirically verifiable) conditions or premises, so as to allow us to also make some apodictic (nonfalsifiable) predictions of central importance concerning the social world, provided only that these initial conditions are indeed met and fulfilled.

I am speaking and writing here for an audience that already is or is about to become familiar in particular with the intellectual work of Ludwig von Mises and Murray Rothbard. And it is in Mises’s magnum opus *Human Action* (1998) and in Rothbard’s *Man, Economy, and State* (2009) that we can find a quite elaborate system of such apodictic propositions and can come to recognize and appreciate their momentous importance, not just for our understanding and interpretation of past events but in particular also regarding the prediction of future events. I shall present merely a few examples of such propositions here to give a flavor of their epistemological status as well as their practical importance.

We do not know all potential human goals, but we do know for certain that whatever they may be, they are supposed to bring about an improvement in an actor’s well-being; and we do know for certain that wherever and whenever a person does what he does, he always does it because he considers it, in a given situation, his most highly valued or most urgently needed goal or end.

We do not know all potential means employed by man in his activities, but we do know for certain that whatever an actor uses as a means derives its value as a “good” for him from the value he attaches to the very end or goal that it is supposed to help bring about. And while we cannot predict the changes in the subjective value he attaches to various ends, we can predict with certainty that a higher (or lower) value attached to some given goal, whatever it is, will also raise (or lower) the value of the means or goods used to produce this goal, and that the discovery of the suitability of certain means for additional goals, for instance, will increase the value of such means.

Moreover, while we cannot know (scientifically predict) what thing or entity may ever be used as a means or a good by man, we know for sure that for everything ever considered a good by an actor, he prefers more of such a good over less. We also know for sure that as more and more units of some given good are added to our supply, we attach less value to a unit of such good, as it can only be employed for the satisfaction of increasingly lower ranked (or less urgent) ends or needs (the law of diminishing marginal utility).

Furthermore, while we cannot safely predict an actor’s future locations (where he will be and when), we can safely predict that he can never be at two places at the same time, and likewise that he can never simultaneously perform two contrary or contradictory actions (such as going up and down a staircase or ladder at the same time).³

We cannot predict “scientifically” what sorts of goods or products man will ever produce and what sorts of goods or products he may ever consume, but we know for sure that there can be no consumption without prior production, and we can also be certain that whatever is consumed today cannot be consumed again tomorrow. Additionally, we know with certainty that man cannot for any lengthy time consume more goods than he produces (unless he steals from others), and that it is only by way of savings, in consuming less than what is produced, that he can possibly increase his own prosperity.

³ Incidentally, note that Popperians would have to qualify these propositions as unscientific, because they are apparently nonfalsifiable, and yet the alibi principle entailed in the first proposition, for instance, constitutes an indispensable tool in practically every criminal investigation, as every reader or viewer of detective stories knows, and no one has ever thought of questioning or abandoning it.

We cannot make safe and certain predictions concerning where, when, and what sorts of exchanges (be they of material goods or of immaterial ones, such as words or gestures) are to take place between various people, but we do know for sure that for any voluntary exchange to take place, both parties to the exchange must expect to be made better off by the exchange, they must evaluate the goods to be exchanged as of unequal value, and they must have an opposite preference order regarding them. We also know with certainty that any involuntary exchange, whatever it may concern, makes one party better off while making the other party worse off.

Additionally, from the outset of human history, we cannot know what sort of thing is to become a money (i.e., a common medium of exchange), how long it is to maintain its status as money, or what other thing might replace it as money in the future. But for any society exceeding the size of a single household and with a bare minimum of a division of labor, we can, based on our aprioristic knowledge concerning the universal structure of action, deduce and safely predict the emergence of *some* common medium of exchange. This is because any direct exchange of goods or services requires a double coincidence of wants—that is, I must want what you have, and you must want what I have. Yet this obstacle to and limitation of direct exchange can be overcome, and the conditions for an actor can be improved, by means of indirect exchange. A person who cannot attain what he wants in direct exchange can increase his chances of getting what he ultimately wants if he succeeds in first acquiring in exchange a *more marketable* good than his own, to be then more easily saleable for the ultimate thing. This practice further increases the marketability of the very good in question and stimulates others to follow this example. Thus, step by step, via rationally motivated imitation, a common medium of exchange emerges: a money (originally a commodity money) that is the most easily saleable and most widely accepted good, and as such clearly to be distinguished in its function from both producer and consumer goods.

With money come money prices, price comparisons, and economic calculation. There is nothing to be known with certainty about future money prices paid for this or that, about future price comparisons, or about future business calculations—but again, there are some things that we do know for certain. For instance,

if the quantity of money is increased, the purchasing power per monetary unit is reduced below what it would otherwise have been. An increase in the quantity of money cannot increase overall social wealth (as an increase in the quantity of producer and consumer goods would) but can only lead to a redistribution of wealth to the advantage of the money producer(s).

We know for certain that economic calculation requires that a person can compare the input of production with the output of production to determine whether less valuable means were transformed into more valuable means (as intended). For such a comparison to be possible, there must be money prices for all factors of production as well as for all final goods. Under old-style socialism, with all means of production owned and controlled by one central committee, no input-factor prices exist; hence, economic calculation under socialism is impossible.

We can also know for sure (via the law of marginal utility) that if the price for some good is increased (or decreased), and everything else is assumed to remain constant (the *ceteris paribus* assumption), then either the same quantity or less (or either the same quantity or more) will be bought. And we know just as surely that prices fixed above market prices, such as minimum wages, will lead to unsaleable surpluses (i.e., to forced unemployment), whereas prices fixed below market-clearing prices, such as rent ceilings, will lead to shortages (i.e., to a persistent shortage of rental housing). And we also know with certainty that if any of these predictions happen to fail in some particular case, this would not be because of an error in our logically deduced conclusion, but because the *ceteris paribus* assumption had not been met in the particular case under consideration, and we would have to look for some significant changes in an actor's empirical circumstances in order to account for the observed anomaly.

Indeed, as already demonstrated most strikingly with the example of the alibi principle, no "experience" or so-called empirical evidence can ever falsify, beat, or trump praxeology and logic, but praxeology and praxeological reasoning can reveal that there is something wrong about an alleged experience or evidence. I could go on and on with further examples of apodictic propositions (i.e., propositions that can be *begriffen* [conceptually grasped]). But I am

quite confident that the short list of examples I have provided will suffice to demonstrate that they have a distinctly different epistemological status than what is commonly understood as “empirically falsifiable hypotheses,” and that the popular Popperian view—presented by Karl Popper (2013) first in his *Logik der Forschung*—of scientific progress as proceeding step by step, through the successive falsification of empirical and empirically testable hypotheses, gradually into the light, is entirely misconceived. All too many people (including Popper, as Mises briefly notes in his *Ultimate Foundation of Economic Science* [1962]) are apparently unfamiliar with praxeology and its intellectual achievements. And yet, as the few examples of apodictic, nonfalsifiable propositions just presented should have made amply clear, the knowledge conveyed by praxeology is indispensable for any correct interpretation of the past. Without it any historian is bound to screw up somewhere in his narrative; and even more importantly, without such knowledge we are destined to commit many errors concerning the prediction of future events that definitely could have been known beforehand and accordingly been avoided.

Looking from a methodological point of view at the current state of affairs in the social sciences (including economics), then, we can readily diagnose two major and interrelated confusions, both ultimately rooted in the typically unquestioning acceptance of some variant of “empiricist philosophy” among most practicing social (and nearly all natural) scientists. The first confusion concerns the widespread belief that things can be accomplished in the social sciences that simply *cannot* be accomplished. Contrary to the belief of many social researchers, there are no “empirical laws”—verified, confirmed, or not yet falsified by empirical data—to be found and discovered within the realm of human action and interaction. Here, more humility is in order. One’s research may still be interesting and relevant, but it is not what it claims to be.

And the second confusion, widespread in particular among economists, has just been addressed: it is the inability (or unwillingness) to recognize the categorical epistemological difference between apodictic or, in Kantian language, synthetic a priori propositions on the one hand and empirical or a posteriori propositions on the other. As “good” empiricists who only recognize and only know of empirical laws (apart from math), they are increasingly often

busy subjecting propositions that are deductively derived from some a priori true starting point to empirical tests. That is, they test the untestable, and they try to falsify the nonfalsifiable, and whatever insight may happen to spring from such misguided endeavors is overshadowed by the intellectual damage done (and the confusion spread) by the blatant category mistake undergirding and committed with any such research.

A THEORY OF CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Finally, as promised, and as further proof of the intellectual power of deductive reasoning based on first, undeniable, and undoable principles, a brief remark concerning conflict, conflict avoidance, and conflict resolution by means of argumentation.

Differences of opinion are not conflicts, although they can of course lead to conflicts. Rather, conflicts are physical clashes resulting from incompatible ownership claims regarding the same scarce or rivalrous good by two or more different persons. In principle, then, for all conflicts to be avoided it is only necessary that every good be always owned privately, by some specified individual(s), and that it be always recognizable which good is owned by whom. The plans and purposes of different actors may then be as different as can be, and yet no interpersonal conflict will arise as long as their respective actions involve only and exclusively the use of their own private property.

But who owns what scarce good as his private property and who does not? First, each person owns his physical body that only he and no one else controls *directly*. And second, as for scarce resources that can be controlled *only* indirectly (that must be appropriated by means of our own nature-given, unappropriated bodies), exclusive control (property) is acquired by and assigned to that person who appropriated the good in question *first* or who acquired it, through voluntary (conflict-free) exchange, from its *previous* owner. For only the *first* appropriator of a resource (and all later owners connected to him through a chain of voluntary exchanges) can possibly acquire and gain control over it without conflict. If exclusive control is assigned instead to *latecomers*, conflict is not avoided but, contrary to the very purpose of norms, made unavoidable and permanent.

This is only the mere bare bones of a theory that has been elaborated in much greater detail elsewhere. However, it should be apparent that, with this deductively derived “a priori insight” into the nature of human conflict, we have also acquired an eminently powerful and practical tool and method for allowing us to fulfill the function of “justice of the peace” and decide about right and wrong, permissible and impermissible, proper and improper, regarding all sorts of cases of conflicting (incompatible) property claims.

Thus, another hail to theory, something that today’s largely empiricist research culture stubbornly (or foolishly) fails to recognize as even existing.

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