EXPLAINING EXPLANATION: A CRITICAL REVIEW OF JOHN LEVI MARTIN'S *THE EXPLANATION OF SOCIAL ACTION*

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ABSTRACT

Purpose − *To summarize and evaluate John Levi Marin's recent book,* The Explanation of Social Action *(2011), the central thesis of which is that the actions of other people cannot be explained without first understanding those actions from the point of view of the actors themselves. Martin thus endeavors to reorient social science toward concrete experience and away from purportedly useless abstractions.*

Design/methodology/approach − *This review chapter employs close scrutiny of and applies immanent critique to Martin's argumentative claims, warrants, and the polemical style in which these arguments are presented.*

Findings − *This chapter arrives at the following conclusions: (1) Martin unnecessarily truncates the scope of sociological investigation; (2) he fails to define the key concepts within his argument, including "explanation,"*

*"social action," and "understanding," among others; (3) he overempha-
sizes the external or "environmental" causes of action; (4) rather than
inducing actions, the so-called "action-fields" induce experiences, and are
therefore incapable of explaining actions; (5) Martin rejects counterfac-
tual definitions of causality while defining his own notion of causality in
terms of counterfactuals; (6) most of his critiques of other philosophical
accounts of causality are really critiques of their potential misapplication;
(7) the separation of experience and language (i.e., propositions about
experience) in order to secure the validity of the former does not secure
the validity of sociological inquiry, since experiences are invariably
reported in language; and, finally, (8) Martin's argument that people are
neurologically incapable of providing accurate, retrospective accounts of
the motivations behind their own actions is based on the kind of third-
person social science he elsewhere repudiates; that he acknowledges the
veracity of these studies demonstrates the potential utility of the "third-
person" perspectives and the implausibility of any social science that
abandons them.*

Originality/value − *To date Martin's book has received much praise but
little critical attention. This review chapter seeks to fill this lacuna in the
literature in order to better elucidate Martin's central arguments and the
conclusions that can be reasonably inferred from the logical and empiri-
cal evidence presented.*

 Keywords: Social action; social aesthetics; critical theory; action fields;
 John Levi Martin; explanation

INTRODUCTION

Why do people do what they do? John Levi Martin attempts to answer this
question in his latest book, *The Explanation of Social Action* (2011),[1] for
which he was awarded the American Sociological Association's Theory
Prize in 2012.[2] The central idea motivating Martin's work is that the
actions of other people cannot be explained without first understanding
those actions from the point of view of the actors themselves. To under-
stand why people do what they do, we must first ask them why they do it.
More specifically, Martin is interested in investigating the conditions under
which people feel required or pressured to perform some social action. By
defending the validity of first-person accounts of action, Martin endeavors

to reorient social science toward concrete experience and away from useless abstractions.

As the product of a particular style of erudition, Martin's work is a convincing display of scholarship that is, at times, fascinating and thought-provoking. At the same time, it is largely polemical in style and tends to produce a subtle bandwagon effect upon those who read and find appealing its overall orientation and aspirations. Consequently, my review cannot do justice to the range of topics covered in Martin's extensive and erudite work. In addition, this review employs a different rhetorical style, not to devalue the style employed in *ESA*, but rather, to evaluate and extrapolate in a sober manner the validity and consequences of its many arguments and insights. Perhaps, most importantly, Martin's effort is directed at reminding us that the study of human action is also always a relationship with human actors. Although there is much that I agree with in this book, the bulk of my response will not be directed at discussing those aspects that I find unobjectionable, but at scrutinizing those passages that elicit dissent or that warrant further elucidation, which is not to diminish the fact that his work is impressive and deserves to be read.

Martin admirably espouses a sociology of the concrete and a critical dismissal of critical theories that are dismissive of actors. Gestalt psychologist Fritz Perls expressed a similar sentiment, I believe, when he encouraged his patients to "lose their minds and come to their senses." Although I am in accordance with the underlying orientation of Martin's work, the task of accurately identifying, summarizing, and evaluating the most important arguments in *ESA* is made exceedingly difficult due to his disjointed and desultory style of writing. Martin often juxtaposes thoroughly detailed expositions with ad hoc assertions that derive more of their argumentative force from the provocative and emotive style in which they expressed than from any logical or pragmatic evaluation of their warrants.

ESA is not easily classifiable as a theory of explanation in the philosophy of social science. Martin's exposition tangentially relates to a number of competing approaches to explanation but does not explicitly associate itself with any one of them. Indeed, he explicitly rejects logical positivism and Hempel's covering law model of explanation, according to which to explain is to show how to derive the *explanans* in a logical argument, as well as hypothetico-deductivism; but on the other hand, Martin evaluates favorably the positivism of Mach. He is also explicitly critical of Bayesianism, and one can reasonably infer, based on his repudiation of generalization (aka "subsumptive reasoning"), that he would not associate with any branch of unificationism, according to which to explain some

unknown phenomenon is to show how it is a particular instance of some larger pattern that is known.

One might then assume that Martin adopts some variant of realism, but he resists equating explanation with the identification of underlying causal mechanisms and is generally skeptical toward all explanations that posit a rigid distinction or opposition between appearances and reality. Unlike critical theorists, Martin does not overuse the adjective "real" when refer-ring to abstractions produced by social scientists, such as "social structure," nor does he write as if there is some more "real" reality hidden behind a distorting veil of appearances. Citing Dewey, Martin says that the relevant difference for actors is not between the apparent and the true, but rather, "the apparent and that which does not appear" (p. 333). Finally, Martin espouses a nuanced and ambivalent relation to the tradition of critical theory. Indeed, Martin is scathingly critical of Freud and repudiates argu-ments of "false consciousness" and ideology critiques. Echoing Giddens (1984), he argues that "there might not even *be* latent functions" (p. 102), and prefers the "naivety" of Malinowski to the supposed sophistication of Merton. Yet, as discussed below, Martin does not repudiate critical theory entirely, and he regards his position as completely compatible with Marx's dialectical method, which uncovers how abstractions are actually rooted in concrete social realities.

In what follows, I will argue the following: (1) Martin unnecessarily truncates the scope of sociological investigation; (2) he fails to define key concepts within his argument, including "explanation," "social action," and "understanding," among others; (3) he overemphasizes the external or "environmental" causes of action; (4) the so-called "action fields" actually do not induce actions at all, but rather, experiences, and are therefore incapable of explaining actions; (5) Martin rejects counterfactual defini-tions of causality while defining his own notion of causality in terms of counterfactuals; (6) most of his critiques of other philosophical accounts of causality are really critiques of their potential misapplication; (7) the separation of experience and language (i.e., propositions about experience) in order to secure the validity of the former does not secure the validity of sociological inquiry, since experiences are invariably reported in language; and, finally, (8) Martin's argument that people are neurologically incapable of providing accurate, retrospective accounts of the motivations behind their own actions is based on the kind of third-person social science he else-where repudiates; that he acknowledges the veracity of these studies demonstrates the potential utility of "third-person" perspectives and the implausibility of any social science that abandons them.

MARTIN'S EXPLANATION OF SOCIAL EXPLANATION

It is important to point out what the book is not. Martin's book is not a comprehensive review of how social scientists have attempted to explain human behavior. Martin does not, for instance, cover evolutionary biological viewpoints, developmental psychology, economics, systems theory, game theory, rational choice theory, agent-based modeling, or hermeneutics, just to name a few possible approaches to the explanation of human behavior. Martin's book is not a summary of competing concepts of explanation or of social action, nor is it a clearly articulated set of positions on salient controversies within the philosophy of social science. Moreover, "the explanation of social action" is a misnomer, for Martin does not attempt to explain social action per se, but rather, exhorts social scientists to study social action in a manner that does justice to the lived-experiences of those who act. In short, *ESA* attempts to explain explanation to social scientists who explain social action.

Martin indicts contemporary social science for providing causal accounts of social action that rely on abstractions which bear little relation to actors' experiences: social scientists today disavow "the cognitive competence of the laity" by favoring explanations that rely on "impersonal causal processes … over the responses that actors themselves might give" (2011, p. x). Martin warns that social science predominantly regards the best explanations as nonobvious, highly abstract, and removed from the phenomenological, concrete reality of actors. Consequently, Martin asserts that social science constitutes an "unfounded intellectual authority" (p. x), is "maniacally wrong" (p. ix), and is even "sociopathic" (p. 8). Although not explicitly defended, the gist of Martin's argument is that sociology reinforces unjust hierarchical and authoritarian relations to the extent that it does not ground its explanations of people's actions in the experiences actors themselves have of those actions. Above all, Martin opposes explanations which insist that people are "'really' doing something other than what they say they are doing, where this 'something other' is an unexperienced abstraction" (p. 336).

Martin traces the prevailing "impersonal" mode of explanation in the social sciences to Freud and Durkheim. According to Martin, Durkheimian sociology "remains the fundamental epistemology for contemporary social scientific practice" (p. 26). In turn, the outlook of Durkheim and Freud can be traced to Quetelet and Charcot respectively. Quetelet viewed social regularities not as the outcomes of social processes, but rather, as their intended endpoints: "he came to believe that nature aimed for the average as a

marksman aimed for a target" (p. 27). Martin argues: "to envision social
science as something that dealt with averages as true 'social facts' (and not
mere aggregations of individuals), the French school and its successors
were drawn toward a vision of social life that had persons pushed about by
external causes" (p. 27).

Martin criticizes critical theorists such as Adorno, and more generally,
the first generation of Frankfurt School theorists who attempted to
synthesize Marxian and Freudian analysis, but he does not dismiss critical
theory altogether. Martin endorses the dialectical method of Marx, which
progresses from the abstract to the concrete. Criticism for Marx was a
"method of *reaching truth by analysis of contradictions (limitations) in
abstractions*" (p. 349). Thus, when Marx "did say that others were mistaken
about what something 'really' was, it was always that what others treated
as an abstraction was really rooted in the concrete − not that it was an
instance of some other abstraction" (p. 349).

Martin asserts that the decoupling of explanation from first-person
accounts leads to a kind of "anything goes" relativism that paradoxically
reinforces authoritarian social contexts in which social scientists are the
authorities. Ostensibly, if all accounts are arbitrary and one is just as good
as any other, social scientists will impose their own favored explanation
and disregard those proposed by the "laity," that is, the actors. But this
response does not necessarily follow (either logically or empirically) from
this antecedent condition. Indeed, the dogmatic application of a particular
explanatory schema such as Freudianism appears totally incompatible with
the assertion that all theories are equally valid.

Martin conflates those (meta-) theories that self-consciously posit episte-
mological relativism (and which, consequently, explicitly self-identified as
"relativist" theories) with any theory, such as Freudianism, which Martin
identifies as deriving from "relativist" cultural or historical conditions.
Freud, however, never espoused cultural or epistemological relativism, and
had he and his followers self-reflexively questioned the alleged apodictic
status of his theories, it could be plausibly argued that many of the abuses
arising either as a direct consequence of Freudianism or indirectly as a
result of the already-authoritarian contexts in which Freudianism was prac-
ticed might have been mollified. It is more reasonable to argue that those
centrifugal social forces engendering modern society created space for the
proliferation of orthogonal and competing discourses, including interpre-
tative frameworks like Freudianism which appeared to make sense of
hitherto unexplored dimensions of human attention and behavior. That the
practice of Freudianism was tied to dogmatism and authoritarianism seems

less related to (epistemological or cultural) relativism per se than to those conditions of fragmentation and concomitant uncertainty upon which relativist theories (but *not* Freudianism) attempted to reflect. Cultural relativism as a theory may be wrong on many counts (see below), but that does not mean that those who espouse such epistemologies are more likely to succumb to dogmatism than are those who espouse nonrelativistic epistemologies, as Martin seems to imply. More importantly, a skeptical inquirer may ask to what extent this story of authoritarian science is actually true. Assuming, for sake of argument, that social scientists really do constitute a "New Class" ala Alvin Gouldner (1979), how much do they control and to what degree has their research contributed to that rule being authoritarian? Confronting Martin's rhetorical soliloquies with blunt and perfunctory questions such as these seems almost bad mannered. The reader wants to be on Martin's side, as it were, but when these statements are evaluated literally, they cannot withstand serious scrutiny. I suspect that few would regard sociologists as having significant social influence, and much less would regard sociologists as authoritarian power mongers needing to be held in check. Finally, when one looks at social scientists from the larger (and real) social contexts in which they are embedded and in comparison with other social classes or institutions (e.g., business, government, military, etc.), Martin's caricature of social science affords even less credence.

GRID OF PERCEPTION

Relying on Gestalt theorists such as Köhler, American pragmatists such as James and Dewey, and Vygotsky and the Russian activity school, among others, Martin asserts the validity of subjective experience and the objective, nonarbitrary character of the "cognitive components of human action."[3] Martin defends the objectiveness of perceived qualities in order to refute the belief that what we perceive is ultimately arbitrary and coded by culture or language, an assumption he refers to as the "grid of perception." The "grid of perception" is the epistemological assumption that our sensory impressions are totally without form, order, or sense until and unless these primary data are organized around cultural templates, the most important of which is language. According to this argument, "all perceptual organization [comes] from speech, not the world" (p. 57).[4] The distinctions to which we become attuned vary, but Martin

insists that variability does not imply arbitrariness or "relativism" of perception: "In sum, the evidence of cultural variability does not support the grid-of-perception argument that we need cultural templates to tell us what things are similar" (p. 137).

Martin's argument is summarily expressed by linguist Roman Jakobson: "Languages differ essentially in what they *must* convey and not in what they *may* convey." Culturally acquired habits and standards of communication (i.e., language) do have some influence on perception, but this influence is not the kind of influence depicted by George Orwell in *1984*, in which forgetting words entails the deletion of our capacity to perceive their referents.[5] Martin's argument has merit, up to a point. When Martin argues that we do not need culture to tell us what things are similar, he is obviously referring to basal perceptual abilities, the kind that we inherit biologically and which are more or less universally shared capacities across all cultures. He readily acknowledges, however, that perceptual abilities are not static, that they adapt to different environments, and that people can acquire new abilities to notice distinctions they had not noticed before. Consider, for example, the wine connoisseur or the grandmaster chess champion. The fact that our culture does not determine what similarities and differences we can physiologically perceive with our senses does not at all mean that our culture (or linguistic practices) does not influence which differences we pay attention to and which we ignore. Think, for instance, of skin tone, hair texture, eye color, height, or any other phenotypic characteristic that has been used to assort people into racial hierarchies. Martin argues against a more extreme constructionism, according to which language somehow determines the phenotypical characteristics themselves. Martin is certainly right that this idea and the urban myths associated with it are wrong. What is more doubtful, however, is that an unequivocal and unidirectional link exists between constructionist epistemologies, on the one hand, and the exacerbation of professional authoritarianism and social hierarchy, on the other hand. Language (i.e., culture) does not determine what we can perceive or how we perceive — at least not at the level of concrete perceptions — but not all perceptions are concrete in the sense of being directly provided by the senses. What is sociologically interesting is not the extent to which our senses are influenced by language, for this influence is negligible, but rather, how and the extent to which sensory perceptions are encoded in language as signs with denotative and connotative meanings, which in turn have consequences for behavior and action.

MISSING LINKS

Unfortunately, some of Martin's arguments are often vague and thus difficult to evaluate. For instance, Martin does not specify what it means for an actor to "understand" or "misunderstand" an explanation, nor does he ever define action or social action.[6] According to Martin's first criterion for successful explanation, the actors whose actions are explained should be able to, "with dialogue, understand the referent of every term in our explanation" (p. 336).[7] Neither this criterion, however, nor the third criterion involving the transmission of "intuitive accessibility" ensures an explanation of first-person plausibility. In other words, the definition of explanation and the criteria he provides for evaluating explanations fail to exclude the sorts of explanations to which he objects.

According to Martin, first-person explanations are "answers to a why question that might come from the experience of the actor in question" (p. 16). Third-person explanations, in contrast, consist of those "answers that treat persons as things outside the conversation, those whose experiences are not necessarily involved in our answers" (p. 17).[8] Third-person explanations, however, can be concrete, first-person explanations can be abstract, and both can fail to possess first-person plausibility. For example, an actor can *understand* a Freudian explanation of the form, "X is really about Y," where Y is some repressed childhood trauma, while also rejecting it. Indeed, some degree of understanding is presupposed in the capacity to evaluate an explanation as invalid. The trouble, then, with third-person explanations is not that people cannot understand their meaning, but rather, that they are unrelated to or in contradiction with their own first-person accounts.

THE LIMITS OF SOCIOLOGICAL INQUIRY

Missing from Martin's account is a serious concern with actions in themselves and their effects, including the unintended consequences of action. Nor does Martin's field-theoretic approach permit the *explananda* of social research to be aggregate *patterns* across space and time. This is because Martin implicitly excludes from social sciences the investigation of macro-events and macro-patterns, with the exception of those already understood as "objects" by the "laity." In many cases, however, aggregate patterns are,

prior to research, latent, and are therefore not attributable to the phenom-
enological experiences of individual actors. Consequently, Martin effec-
tively excludes from social science cross-sectional analyses that compare,
for example, rates of crime or income inequality across countries at a given
moment in time, as well as analyses of time series that compare why birth
rates seem to remain stable across time. Moreover, not all socially signifi-
cant events or patterns are aggregate *action* patterns. Interesting *expla-
nanda* could also include the (social) consequences of nonsocial forces or
the (nonsocial) consequences of social forces.

Understood pragmatically, explanations are answers to "why-questions,"
the criteria of which are specified by the audience to whom the explanation
is addressed (cf. Van Fraassen, 2002).[9] Different why-questions thus elicit
and call forth different kinds of why-answers, that is, different kinds of
explanations. To the extent that Martin intends his argument as a moral
exhortation for social scientists to drop third-person accounts altogether,
that is, to forego utilizing abstract concepts or "causes" not directly linked
to individual experiences, Martin is certainly overextending his argument
and committing the same kind of dismissal of first-person reports that he
deplores — in this case the reports of other social scientists. He may not be
implying this, however; it is difficult to tell.

Martin inveighs against inferential statistics, writing that: the social
sciences "do not explain *any* particular situation; instead, we explain a
tenth or so of each of thousands without explaining any. This, of course, is
because we have given up with the concrete and instead turned to a realm
of abstractions" (p. 30). Martin limits the scope of social science to the
aggregation of case studies, privileging the idiographic to the exclusion of
the nomothetic. Although a strong case can be made for the primacy of
microsituational data (cf. Collins, 2000), to argue that we should comple-
tely jettison all data which lacks first-person phenomenological plausibility
is an unnecessary truncation of social science.

DESCRIPTION AND EXPLANATION

Martin offers no "meta-theoretical definition of explanation" (p. 341), but
nevertheless characterizes good social explanations as "a social relationship
between people in which some phenomenon is explained to some persons
so that they understand it" (p. 333). More specifically, Martin promotes
field theory as a useful explanatory resource for social scientists. In its most

general sense, a field theory is an account that "links intensity of something to position, and movement to intensity" (p. 244). To discover fields of action, Martin proposes that social scientists aggregate reports of subjectively felt imperatives from different actors across multiple situations and then link these to their positions.

Anticipating the objection that aggregating experiences merely *describes* but does not *explain* social action, Martin responds by arguing that knowing *what* and knowing *why* are inseparable. Identifying what someone does is not empirically perspicuous because how we delimit an action is always tied to some interpretation of what the act is intended to do. Identifying an action presupposes identifying its purpose and also vice versa. An attribution of subjective meaning (e.g., motives and intentions) distinguishes an action from mere behavior. When Martin writes that the distinction between asking "what" and asking "why" collapses, he refers only to understanding *what* an action is in a primary sense, that is, what distinguishes it from mere behavior.[10] Since sociology has traditionally designated for itself the task of explaining meaningful "action," rather than behavior, this level of "why" (which identifies a purpose in order to identify *what* an act is) is presupposed. This does not mean that the distinction goes away altogether. Rather, the difference between explaining and describing may be different in different contexts or for different observers.

Moreover, Martin himself distinguishes between causal explanations and descriptions. To put it bluntly, he argues that action fields *cause* urges to act: "we should be able to discern the origin of values in the set of actions that seem to be explained *by* these values" (p. 308). Or, to put it another way, *fields induce actions*. Whereas actions are normally regarded as the means to achieve external goals and desires which are exogenous to the explanation and therefore inexplicable, Martin contends that these ultimate ends are the products of action.[11]

Martin rejects "explanations" which disregard the first-hand accounts of social actions provided by the social actors themselves. What Martin opposes — although he himself does not put it this way — are inaccurate descriptions. Martin's argument, properly clarified, does not imply what he claims. Martin writes that the distinction between explanation and description is "not a scientific one, but a social one — a difference between the problematic and the unproblematic" (p. 333), thus tacitly undermining his assertion that it is a "false dualism" (p. 332). According to this latter claim, the distinction "collapses," and thus ostensibly disappears. The difference between describing and explaining is a necessary and useful tool that will inevitably be employed differently in different contexts. That the distinction

is relative to one's point of view does not mean that the distinction "collapses" or goes away. It would be equally absurd to argue that the difference between left and right constituted a "false dualism" and therefore invalidated egocentric coordinates.

For Martin, the difference between explanation and description never really existed anyway, so it can conveniently be ignored. Martin likely makes this assertion in order to avoid acknowledging that he employs (his own version of) the dualism he repudiates. From the perspective of contextualism or pluralism, Martin does not need to show that the explanatory framework he surreptitiously employs is applicable to any and all other explanatory endeavors. Adopting a pluralistic stance toward explanation, however, would deprive his critique of an applicable target. *ESA* is presumably relevant to social science (and not merely within theory circles) because it attempts to influence and regulate *particular* social scientific explanations by relying on an account of explanation in general. In reality, however, the influence of general theoretical accounts of explanation is unlikely to extend beyond the confines of audiences who read and discuss general theoretical explanatory accounts. As Stanley Fish (1989) observed, general theories may have consequences, but not the consequences of their claims. General theories (and meta-theories) usually have a negligible influence on — and are consequently unable to "discipline" — those actors producing the disciplines that constitute their objects of inquiry because the audiences to whom such criticisms are addressed and the audiences receptive to such criticisms are not coterminous. Although recognizing this general condition of communicative fragmentation certainly does not constitute a specific criticism of Martin's work, it is interesting to observe that the audiences *to whom* Martin's work is ostensibly addressed (i.e., readers of sociological theorizing about social science) and the audiences *about which* Martin's work is directed (i.e., people engaging in third-person causal accounts of human action) inexorably diverge. It would be fascinating to see, for example, how many of those reading *ESA* self-identify as utilizing those methods which are the focus of Martin's critique.

QUALITIES AND SOCIAL AESTHETICS

To recuperate the diminished status of actors and their experiences, Martin affirms the objectiveness of their aesthetic judgments: what actors experience is not arbitrarily predetermined by their linguistic or cultural heritage.

Rather, the qualities that they perceive are objectively real qualities belonging to the objects to which those qualities are attributed. Martin defines social aesthetics as "the study of processes whereby actors take in the qualities of the social world around them" (p. 239). Martin provides few examples of aesthetic judgments and qualities, focusing primarily on the appreciation of artistic beauty. Two additional examples that come to mind include one's culturally acquired taste in food or music, and one's sense of style or fashion. Martin argues that the most fundamental and important qualia for social science, however, is *valuation* or *requiredness* − "the sense that in some situation, something is called for" (p. 243). The feeling of social obligation is the most important qualia for social science. Accordingly, paying one's credit card debts might be rooted in this most important aesthetic experience.

Martin affirms the objectiveness of qualities.[12] Qualities such as beauty are, accordingly, not merely in the eye of the beholder. Unlike mere preferences, aesthetic judgments of qualities can be communicated and debated with others. The perceived qualities of social objects are reflective of real social relationships. Indeed, for a central theme for Martin is that "social objects are experiences of social relations." Varying experiences of the same object merely reflect different relationships to that object, and these relationships are themselves objectively real and partially constitutive of those objects.

Martin contraposes two forms of generalization: abstraction and judgment. He defines the former as the subsumption of some particular, concrete thing into a more general category. In reference to Immanuel Kant, Martin defines judgment as "the capacity to see that a particular case should be identified as an aspect of something more general" (p. 198). He goes on to explain that, in some situations of classification, the particularity of an object is not suppressed but highlighted, as when somebody appreciates some object as beautiful, and these cases constitute instances of judgment. To exercise judgment, then, is basically to generalize without knowing why. Or in other words, judgment is abstraction without explicit rules. In yet another formulation, we can characterize judgments as classifications that cannot (yet) be explicitly formalized or explained.

This distinction is important, for Martin argues that the dismissal of first-person accounts of action is rooted in the dismissal of the faculty of judgment. To extrapolate, Martin argues that people often are unable to explain to themselves or others the reasons for why they place phenomena in the categories that they do (e.g., beautiful, gross, etc.), but this does not mean that they did not have any reasons or that their schemas of

classification are arbitrary or unreasonable. Since those urges or felt imperatives to act are tightly coupled to how actors classify phenomena in their perceptual field, the dismissal of the faculty of judgment − which is the faculty actors use to classify those phenomena − entails the effacement of actors' experiences and the substitution of categories employed by social scientists for those categories used by the actors they study.

Martin advocates a comportment of trust toward our ability to identify the qualities of social objects and their causal relationships without knowing how or why we identify them. Although in some cases this trust may be well-placed, it does not at all justify Martin's seemingly dogmatic stance against formalizing, that is, explicitly communicating to others, how it is we know what we know and under what conditions we experience what we experience. Indeed, this process of making explicit our unconscious and automatic rules of association, by which we regard some phenomenon as counting as another, is part and parcel of social science. Moreover, Martin argues that in fact, there is no trade-off between generality and particularity, that is, that to form concepts and to think generally, we do not need to "bury *any* of the particularities" (p. 29). To argue that particular, idiosyncratic traits are used to classify things as "beautiful" and that these traits cannot be explicitly reduced to some other generic category (i.e.. that we cannot come up with necessary or sufficient *general* conditions for something being "beautiful") does not mean that we pay attention to every particularity of the beautiful object.

EXPERIENCE AND LANGUAGE

Martin does acknowledge that actors can appear to be mistaken about their own motivations and the causes of their behavior. For instance, someone who is hypnotized may be "programmed" to take off her jacket after hearing a specific verbal cue. If asked why she is taking off her jacket, some ad hoc justification is usually offered (e.g., she announces that she suddenly feels warm). Martin does not mention hypnotized patients, but discusses the potentially damning implications of social psychological studies that cast doubt on the ability of people to recognize the causes of their own actions.[13] These studies in social psychology demonstrate convincingly that deliberate attempts to manipulate the behavior or experiences of other people are sometimes successful. In response to the apparent contradiction between the validity of people's experiences and the experimental evidence

which suggests people may be mistaken about the causes of their own motives, Martin points out that the studies lack ecological validity to the extent that their data are collected in highly artificial, controlled environments. On the other hand, however, Martin does acknowledge the validity of experimental results obtained by attribution theorists in social psychology.

Regarding the possibility that people can be mistaken about their own motives, Martin replies that the problem is "not so much false knowledge of true conditions as true knowledge of false conditions" (p. 175). In other words, if people entertain illusions it is because the world is itself illusory. To apply a common metaphor, the "false" appearance of the world is more like a mirage than a hallucination: the former is still objectively there, however distorted and misleading.[14] The issue at hand, however, is incorrect knowledge of one's self, not the world. Martin's argument, properly translated, would be that society itself, or one's relationships within that society, cause one to become cognitively blind to one's motives. If so, Martin would concede his case.

None of these responses adequately address the basic dilemma that Martin faces, namely, how to square the validity of first-person experiences with the apparent fact that people are often wrong about why they do what they do. If actors are wrong about why they do what they do, then social scientists do not need to rely on their first-hand accounts in order to explain their actions. Martin's entire argument is potentially undermined by these findings.

Martin ultimately rests his case on an analytical distinction between experiences as such and propositions-about-experience. Martin contends that the primary "mistake of the Gestalt theorists was to assume that the validity of *experience* translated to the validity of *statements* about experience" (p. 181).[15] Thus, although we cannot necessarily trust what actors say *about* their experiences (i.e., their "propositions about experience"), we can still treat as valid those experiences in themselves. Experiences for Martin are thus secured validity only when we do not interpret them as being *about* the world, that is, when we do not interpret them as linguistic statements containing referential content — at least when that referential content pertains to motives, that is "why" we do things as opposed to how, what, when, and where we do them. If so, the meaning of the "validity" of experience becomes trivial. People's experiences are, of course, not independent of their statements about experience. People have experiences in response to what people say and communicating statements is itself an experience.

Martin ultimately contends that we cannot, in fact, trust actors to explain the motives behind their own actions because humans are neurologically incapable of answering accurately *any* questions about why they do what they do! Martin has good reasons for coming to this conclusion, since it is based on decades of experimental research (incidentally, the kind of research that he finds ethically objectionable). The problem is that it obviously contravenes the rest of *ESA* and renders less plausible the explanatory success of the kind of social science Martin promotes, insofar as "success" is defined in standard scientific practice, the criteria of which Martin is not entirely willing to jettison.

COMMONSENSE CAUSALITY

Martin argues that causality, as it exists (or as it is described) in the social world, is irreducible to the concepts of necessary and sufficient causality. A necessary cause follows the logical relation, "if and only if A, then B," which means that *only* A can cause B, or in other words, there is no B without A. In contrast, a sufficient cause A always (and necessarily) causes effect B, while other things could also cause B. Whereas a necessary cause of something is *the* only cause, a sufficient cause of something might be one of many causes, after which the effect necessarily occurs.

Martin opposes notions of "sufficient causality" because it implies another kind of necessity: "if A is sufficient for B, then there can be no state in which we have A but not B" (p. 70). Martin, in contrast, defends the idea that A *can* be a cause of B, but is not necessarily so: "Thus, if A is 'Aaron Burr shooting off and discharging a bullet against the right side of the belly of Alexander Hamilton' and B is 'Alexander Hamilton died,' we must reject the idea that A is the [*sufficient*] cause of B, since, as we know, said Alexander 'did languish and languishing did live' for a day before dying" (p. 70).[16]

Martin reasons that the word "cause" should be used in social science as it is experienced and used in everyday life.[17] For Martin, some cause (A) can, but does not always, lead to effect (B).[18] For instance, drinking alcohol and driving can, but not in every case, cause an "accident," although our colloquial use of the term "accident" belies its causal determination. Whether or not it does depend on the situation and must be determined on a case-by-case basis. Martin proposes that social scientists adopt a "first-person" or "commonsense" view of causality as impulse or actual

production, a concept of cause which is exemplified in English common law. Martin argues that this first-person, commonsensical view of causality relies not on counterfactuals, but rather "on the use of human motivation as a benchmark" (p. 62) − the "conscious and effective willfullness of a person" (p. 62). Martin proposes that "in the commonsensical understanding … causality can be established in each particular case, even though the first act does not 'invariably' lead to the effect" (p. 64).

A cause is identified counterfactually as any event or condition preceding the effect that, if it had not occurred, would have led to a significantly different outcome. Martin cites Weber's definition of causality as an example of counterfactualism: "If we can imagine a world without A in which it seems plausible that B would occur anyway, then we may propose that A did not cause B because A was unnecessary for B to occur" (p. 34). Although spending much time criticizing what he refers to as "simple counterfactualism," Martin later acknowledges that his own "commonsense" view of causality itself invokes counterfactuals: "we compare what a reasonable person would expect given some situation to what was actually observed" (p. 65). He contrasts a simple, commonsense method consisting of the counterfactual expectations of a community with an unreasonable method comparing what is observed with "an infinite number of arbitrarily chosen imaginary worlds" (p. 66). Martin's commonsense, legal view of causality (and to the apperception of qualities more generally) can be likened to the commonsense, legal view of pornography famously expressed by Justice Potter Stewart: "I know it when I see it." Stewart expresses in this pithy quote both his certainty in his ability to identify pornography as well as his inability to articulate how it is that he makes the identification. Likewise, Martin proposes that we already understand what causality is, despite the fact that we cannot come up with any acceptable formalizations of it.

As pointed out by Alan Garfinkel, the real problem of arguing that if A hadn't happened, B would not have happened is in deciding what is going to count as B not happening.[19] Suppose we want to explain what caused a car accident. Alan Garfinkel notes that if by "car accident" we mean "that very accident" that concrete particular, then *everything* about the situation is going to be necessary for it: the shirt I was wearing, the kind of truck I was hit by, and so forth, since if any one of them had not occurred, it would not have been *that* accident" (1981, p. 30). Alan Garfinkel's proposes that the object of any explanation is always embedded in some contrast space or space of alternatives. He calls this the thesis of *explanatory relativity*: to ask "Why X?" is to implicitly ask "Why

not Z?" Two different explanations of some event or condition of X that presuppose two different contrasts Z's are really explanations of two different objects altogether. The object of explanation (the *explanandum*) itself "is therefore not a simple object, like an event or a state of affairs, but more like a state of affairs together with a definite *space of alternatives to it*" (1981, p. 21). MacIver expresses this point by saying that "the search for causes is directed to the differences between things" (1973 [1942], p. 27). The important point is that every causal investigation aims to explain a specific difference.

My objection is that the views of causality which Martin criticizes (e.g., a view of counterfactualism that compares some event with an "infinite" number of "alternatives worlds") are not the views of many practicing social scientists, but at best the extrapolated logical consequences of such views made by philosophers. Any account of causality will be rendered untenable if judged by the efficacy with which its adherents defend all of its possible logical extrapolations, including Martin's account. What is interesting is that Martin inoculates his own "commonsensical" account from the kinds of arguments he employs against others by concluding that any account of causality is ultimately untenable. One wonders to what extent this criticism applies to his own account, an account that denies all accounts. Despite appearances, Martin criticizes, not counterfactualism, but its inappropriate application. In effect, Martin criticizes unreasonable practices that, as a matter of principle, no one endorses anyway, and as a matter of practice, cannot be identified at the level of principle.

Ultimately, Martin never really tells us what causality is, preferring to regard it as a primitive concept that defies definition. The problem with this is that people *do* possess concepts of causality, commonsensical or otherwise, and they are often incompatible with one another. To say that we should adopt a commonsensical understanding of causality is to presuppose rather than prove that this commonsensical view is a singular thing, that we already know what this is, and that it is valid. To use as a model for social science the legal notion of causality is not to offer an explanation, but rather to postpone it.

CAUSES AND MOTIVES

Martin overemphasizes the external or "environmental" causes of action. In the December 2012 issue of the American Sociological Association's

Theory Newsletter, *Perspectives,* Martin avers that "Field theory recognizes that the antecedents of action ('impulsions') lie in the qualities and affordances of social objects, thereby providing a parsimonious explanation for action" (2012, p. 3). Even assuming that actions are caused by objects external to actors (which are undoubtedly implied − although Martin might deny this straightforward rendering), this does not mean that all actions are "induced: (i.e., caused) by objects that are social as opposed to nonsocial, unless by "action" Martin actually means "social action." No warrant, however, is provided to justify the claim that only social objects induce social actions.

Although the belief that action is both subjectively motivated and objectively determined is a sociological truism, Martin pays almost exclusive attention to the latter: in Martin's schema, (subjective, yet real) objects cause actions. We tend to think of motives, reasons, and desires as internally causing some directed action toward some external object: for example, my desire for ice cream causes me to eat it. Martin reverses this causal sequence: the deliciousness of the ice cream induces me to eat it. This is, no doubt, part of a rhetorical strategy to break our habit of thinking of subjective perceptions as somehow nonobjective. Translating the implications of Martin's analysis into common vernacular, Martin says that people do things because of the strong urges they feel to do them, and these urges are correlated with the (real) qualities of objects they perceive in their environments. Martin insists, however, that the "impulsions" of social objects are not the same as external causes. To say that a quality of a social object impels or induces action is not, according to Martin, the same as to claim that a quality of a social object *causes* people to act. The semantic difference is not clarified, however, since in common vernacular to impel means to drive, force or urge, and an impulsion is just an impulse, a strong urge to do something, all of which can be understood as "causing" in the broad sense of generating an outcome.

A more serious criticism is that fields cannot explain social action because they do not induce social action. Instead, what Martin calls fields of action are actually fields of experience, that is, different perceptions and "felt imperatives." These are not actions themselves, but the antecedents of *possible* actions. Martin does not really attempt to answer the question he claims to answer, namely, "Why do people do what they do?" Instead, he addresses a related but distinct question pertaining to the experiences of actors *prior* to acting: "Why do people desire what they desire to do?" Although Martin's field theory acknowledges that the influence of social fields is selective (i.e., not everyone is affected or affected in the same way,

just as only certain kinds of material are attracted by magnetic fields) and also that the influence of any particular field varies depending on the position of the actor within the field, his explanation of action ultimately founders on the one-sidedness of his approach. Summarized, Martin's thesis amounts to the claim that "experiences drive actions" and that "fields induce experiences." Of course, however, the converse of each statement is also true.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Although promising, *ESA* as a whole appears inchoate. Martin readily acknowledges that the ideas presented in *ESA* are not new, yet Martin seems to employ throughout a strategy of intellectual distinction, perhaps in order to express these old ideas in a new way or perhaps to make any potential criticisms appear inapplicable, or both. Consequently, my attempts to explicate his arguments have taken the form of reasonable extrapolations, which can always be refuted on the grounds that they misrepresent or fail to identify the author's intent, or in this case, that I have failed to include in my redaction the seemingly endless qualifications that are amended to his arguments. Whether intended or not, Martin's opacity functions largely as a deterrent to criticism.

My point is not (entirely) to express my frustration with the apparent opacity of some of Martin's analyses, but more importantly, to suggest that the success of his sociological undertaking might itself be studied sociologically as symptomatic and revealing of the kinds of selection mechanisms operating in professional sociology. One of the implicit desiderata of professional sociological theorizing is to produce writing that pushes the unfamiliar as close as possible to, but without exceeding, the limit beyond which novelty becomes mere incomprehensibility. The intelligentsia, after all, demand complexity and complexity precludes total and swift comprehension. This is in part because one of the (latent) functions of professional sociological theorizing, including this review, is to produce novel and provocative writing which connects to and induces more sociological theorizing, and the continuation of this enterprise requires the production of ever more refined distinctions that outside of the contexts in which they are made become meaningless. Martin's book is certainly not intended for the laity. Utilizing Martin's metaphor of the "consubstantiality" of inside and outside, we should expect social scientists to reconstitute within

their professional milieu many of the most salient patterns and tendencies of the larger social contexts in which they are embedded.

That his book is hard to classify according to extant classificatory schemes is not itself a shortcoming. On the contrary, the development of a novel theoretical idiom can provide powerful argumentative resources that can collectively mobilize social scientists and reorient social scientific research. A theoretical perspective can also make a positive contribution to societal and social scientific progress to the extent that it facilitates reflection that illuminates those existing social conditions that prevent "the reconciliation of facts and norms" (Dahms, 2008, p. 28). This can only occur, however, if a theory also relates to and elucidates existing social scientific paradigms and controversies, and this is what *ESA* promises but ultimately falls short of accomplishing. In his concluding page, Martin writes that: "there will be a strong tendency to dismiss the suggestions made here simply because they are too vague and open ended, and we may prefer the surety of our own formulaic approach to explanation over the chaos of one guided only by good faith" (p. 350). I will take the bait here and testify that Martin's argument *is* vague, and, because I agree strongly with Arthur Stinchcombe's contention that "for a social theorist ignorance is more excusable than vagueness" (1968, p. 6), I do not regard his "good faith" as sufficient compensation for this lack of clarity. I share many of Martin's predilections, and his positions may not be wrong. Rather, along with Wolfgang Pauli, one could say of Martin's theories that they are "not even wrong."

NOTES

1. Hereafter ESA.
2. Martin also won the award in 2010 for his book *Social Structures* (2009).
3. Martin scoffs that it is as absurd to question the reality of our cognition as it is to question the reality of a stomach digesting food, asking why, if "we do not ponder how the stomach can 'really' digest food … do we wonder whether the mind can 'really' know?" (p. 183). In response, the obvious difference is that stomachs do not think or communicate about their environments in the form of referential linguistic propositions which can be evaluated according to their truth validity.
4. More precisely, Martin lists that the fundamental assumptions of the "grid of perception" argument are that: "(1) perceptions must be ordered by a mental scheme for them to make sense; (2) these mental schemes consist of conceptual 'boxes' into which we can put perceptions; (3) a great deal of the overall structure of boxes – the grid we use to carve up reality – is, from the standpoint of nature,

arbitrary; and (4) these boxes map on to language (again highlighting their social nature)" (p. 130).

5. This argument is made eloquently by Guy Deutscher in his book, *Through the Language Glass* (2011).

6. For a discussion of how contemporary sociology has largely conflated the Weberian trichotomy of action, behavior, and social action into a dichotomy between behavior and social action, see Campbell (1996).

7. Martin proposes three criteria for good explanations: "(1) a coexistence of explanatory terms with the first-person experiences of actors; (2) a coherent compilation of these perspectives; (3) intuitive accessibility, which may in turn be proved … by (3a) prediction, (3b) intervention, or (3c) transposability" (2011, p. 340).

8. Martin does not specify the relation that obtains between experiences and statements which "might come from them." One wonders also whether the frequent practice of explaining what other people do (i.e., issuing third-person accounts) is itself a social action capable of being explained in terms of first-hand reporting.

9. In his classic monograph *Social Causation* (1973 [1942]), MacIver distinguishes no less than six "Modes of the Question Why," including four "Causal Whys" (the Why of Invariant Order exemplified in physics; the Why of Organic Function, exemplified in anatomy or biology; the Whys of Objective, Motivation, and Design, unique to the "Psychological Nexus" or consciousness; and the Why of Social Conjuncture) as well as two noncausal "Whys" (the Why of Inference, exemplified most strikingly by logic and mathematics, and the Why of Obligation, pertaining to social norms).

10. Runciman (1983) distinguishes between primary, secondary, and tertiary senses of understanding, corresponding respectively to the challenge of first, reporting what the action was; second, explaining why that action was taken, that is, what caused it; and third, describing and evaluating what it was like for the agent to do it.

11. This point is reminiscent of another contemporary social theorist, David Graeber, who proposes that we think of "value" as the importance we ascribe to actions rather than to things: "one tends to discover that the objects that are the ultimate stakes of some field of human endeavor are, in fact, symbolic templates which compress into themselves those patterns of human action which create them" (2007, p. 99).

12. Martin's chapter on social aesthetics and judgment is obscure, especially the relationship between judgment and aesthetic appreciation. I judge this to be an objective quality inherent to the writing itself and not a mere opinion. The term "quality" (which does not refer to an action at all, but to an experience) is especially abstruse and out of place in the context of discussing human sensory perception.

13. For example, Martin discusses Dutton and Aron's (1974) study of misattributed lust on the Capilano Suspension Bridge in Vancouver, as well as Schachter and Singer's (1962) study, in which subjects were given adrenaline injections. In the latter study, those who were not informed of the likely physical effects of the adrenaline were more strongly influenced by the feigned reaction of a confederate, who expressed either happiness or anger.

14. Martin reiterates this argument again in response to the argument that affirming the validity of first-person experiences would justify racism or other socially egregious beliefs. Martin writes that "the problem is not in the perception,

but in the world, and it makes little sense to put people in a distorted world and ask them to see straight" (p. 230).

15. The phenomenon of "verbal overshadowing" might provide an example. People who are asked to describe a face after seeing it are worse at recognizing the same face later.

16. I concur that social causality need not be modeled as necessary or sufficient, but Martin's arguments here are unconvincing. Notice that Martin's argument regarding the time delay between cause and effect itself has no bearing on the question of the (necessary) sufficiency of a particular cause. One could still maintain, however unreasonable it might appear, that shooting is a sufficient cause of death at some later time. How specifically we define "death" also does not pertain to the question of sufficiency. Although this objection may seem like hair-splitting, this particular poorly constructed argument is characteristic of dozens of other arguments in , too many and too unimportant to report, the conclusions of which many sociologists are nevertheless likely to glowingly approve.

17. Martin provides etymological and developmental evidence supporting the notion that the word "cause" originally meant motivation, or is at least indistinguishable from it. Etymologically, the English word cause is derived from the Latin causa meaning "purpose" or "reason." Ontogenetically, the concept of causality is experienced in infancy as effective will over external objects. Children do not initially distinguish between the social and epistemic uses of words like may or must.

18. Martin does not provide a clear exposition of the relation between necessary, sufficient, and counterfactual approaches to explanation. For instance, in a section in Chapter 2 entitled "The Insufficiency of Necessity," Martin states that the ideas of necessary and sufficient causes are "antithetical," associating the former with "third-person" causality and the latter with "narrative," first-person causality. In addition, he conflates the notion of necessary cause with counterfactual approaches to explanation.

19. Alan Garfinkel should not be confused with the more well-known ethnomethodologist, Harold Garfinkel. In a footnote to the preface, Martin strongly denounces the latter Garfinkel, calling his writing "gobbledy-gook" and asserting that he acted "more like a cult leader than a scholar" (p. xi).

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