

Book Reviews

MODELS OF MAN

What is man? The answers given this question by David, Job, Aeschylus, Pythagoras, Democritus, Aristotle, Augustine, Hobbes, Shakespeare, Descartes, Spinoza, La Mettrie, Bentham, Mark Twain, Freud, Durkheim, and B. F. Skinner, to name a few, provide models of man. Classical thinkers expatiated on the marvelous things man is capable of accomplishing on account of his unique power of reasoning. In our scientific era the favored view takes man to be whatever instantiates the laws of the behavioral sciences. But are the basic behavioral laws about individuals or about groups? From the point of view of the psychologist or economist it seems clear that, since groups are nothing but sets of individual men, women, and children, group behavior is an integration of personal behavior and so the ultimate explanatory principles must be about individuals. Hence the model *Homo psychologicus*. The sociologist or anthropologist can retort, however, that man is a social animal whose behavioral repertoire is given by society. *Homo sociologicus*. And so the nature-nurture controversy continues.

Martin Hollis, *Models of Man: Philosophical Thoughts on Social Action* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1977), looks on this debate as superficial. Both *Homo psychologicus* and *Homo sociologicus* and all the hybrids agree in being passive conceptions "treating human agency as a natural and determined phenomenon." They are but variants of one theme, Plastic Man, the true antithesis to which is Autonomous Man, who does what he does because he has the best of reasons for doing it. Autonomous Man is active not passive: his actions have determinants unique to the agent by himself. Hollis in this important book aims to "find a metaphysic for the rational social self," that is, to show that Autonomous Man is not to be excluded a priori from the domain of scientific investigation.

Hollis concedes the strength of passive models, which see actions as causally connected, thus explicable according to natural-science paradigms. Moreover, they have the ominous advantage of promising the possibility of human engineering: "Ethics is the agriculture of the mind," Hollis quotes Helvetius. Nor do these models rule out freedom, if one is prepared to accept a Hume-Mill soft determinism. Hollis is not out to abolish Plastic Man and causal explanation in the social sciences. We are all passive most of the time, and then the problem is only to account causally for what we do. He wishes, however, to "exploit a gap where partial determinism falls short of complete explanation." This is where you do not know why the thing was done unless you know what the agent's reasons were, though the reasons did not *cause*

the action.

One kind of reason for acting is provided by role theory: the agent had role R which required A; he knew it; so he did it because of these facts. This, Hollis points out, is a normative explanation, a fact that embarrasses behaviorist and other mechanistic accounts but does not of itself pose a threat to passive models, since role-theoretical explanations can be assimilated to the causal model: he did so-and-so because (*sc.* the cause was that) his role determined what motives for action he had. Autonomous Man makes his entry when one asks about the relations between reasons and motives. Autonomous agents, not being *mere* occupants of roles, nor exhaustively describable in terms of traits acquired through nature and nurture, must be viewed instead as expressing their identity in rational choice of what roles to adopt. You can take on a role passively; but if you do, there is likely to be an identity crisis—an unpleasantness that only the possibility of Autonomous Man makes intelligible. If you are what you are simply as the outcome of the workings of psychological or sociological sufficient conditions, how can there be any uneasiness at it?

It is necessary, then, to ask the question, *What* is it that plays the roles? Hollis is thus ineluctably led into the intricacies of the problem of personal identity. He concludes that "strict identity is that of bodies," with social identity determined by "their [the bodies?'] having rationally become occupants of social positions." The importance of this analysis is that the interests of rational agents *both* differ from agent to agent (depending on, or indeed constituting, what the agent essentially is) *and* are prior to the assumption of roles.

Hollis turns next to sorting out the elements of action. Wishing to maintain that Autonomous Man is "both a free agent and a proper subject for science," he finds that, while explanation in terms of purposes, intentions, and rules is (or may be) noncausal, it still does not capture the full concept of autonomy; a man following rules may be quite Plastic. We need to know why he has the intentions and purposes he has, why he follows these rules and not those. A role, for instance, may supply a motive for a certain action which nevertheless is not the full and sufficient reason for the action, as Hollis demonstrates in an appropriately Italianate discussion of the predicament of Machiavelli's Prince. Hollis comes in the end to the admittedly extreme claim that rational action can only be that which both is and is seen by the agent to be in his own objectively best interest. This is an ideal to which actual behavior more or less approximates. The judgment of rationality applies to ends as well as to means.

But what if this ideal is vacuous—if people acted rationally, they would do so on the basis of objective perceptions of their own best interests; but in fact they simply act as they are caused to act? Is decision possible between the rival metaphysics of passivity and activity? Here Hollis's argument takes a linguistic turn. He contends that if we are to understand any human action at all we must understand what people tell us. How is it possible to know what people mean when they say such-and-such, since "another

interpretation is always possible"? (Quine's problem of the indeterminacy of translation, which of course holds just as much between two speakers of "English" as between English and Twi.) Hollis's answer is that it is necessary to assume that communication is an activity among rational men, who (mainly) intend to speak the truth and (mainly) do so by saying the same things about the items of their experience as the investigator does; in other words, they share a common conceptual scheme. This amounts to the assumption that men have at least some reasons for at least some of the things they do, viz., their speech acts. This is not just a defense of the view that (some) men are (sometimes) rational but also of reason against a generalized Kuhnianism (for if language is to be possible, not all "paradigms" are alterable) and against empiricism (for this necessary assumption must be justified a priori).

Thus for Hollis "the real is the rational"—indeed, the rational is prior to the real, in the sense that reality (the action) finds its explanation in reason (an ideal construct). He argues further that knowledge of theoretical truths—which, as for Popper, *are* truths, and uncontaminated by psychology—is (or can be) a priori. Statements of the form "A is the best thing for agent B to do in circumstances C" are, if true, necessarily true. Hollis proves this for chess, where it is obvious for simple end-game problems, and considers himself justified in generalizing. Where the action is not (fully) rational, however, "two kinds of explanation co-exist. The compromise no doubt sets puzzles unresolved here."

As an admirer of Spinoza's philosophy, in reading this book I was continually impressed by how much Hollis's Autonomous Man looks like Spinoza's free man "who lives according to the guidance of reason," dressed in the costume of our time. As is well known, Spinoza makes the distinction between freedom and bondage to lie in the difference between activity and passivity. Moreover, Hollis's contention that rational action is that which is in the best interest of the agent, is precisely equivalent to Spinoza's claim that the free man acts always "from the ground of seeking his own profit." (Hollis acknowledges a link to Spinoza, p. 100.) And this equivalence is hardly a coincidence: Hollis is to be counted among the small but flourishing band of modern rationalists stalwartly defending natural necessity, a priori truth in natural and even social science, essences, and real definitions.

If there is a difference between the two thinkers, it seems to lie in what we might call Hollis's explanatory dualism: his contention that rational action is to be explained noncausally but nonrational or irrational action by causes. In the sense in which an explanation is a removal of puzzlement, this is right: we want to know why our fellow men behave peculiarly, and causal accounts satisfy this need. On those occasions when people do what obviously is the best thing for them to do, no questions arise, no explanations are called for, so we can say if we choose that "rational action is its own explanation." No one ever has a *reason* to make a mistake. All the same, the fool has what appear to *his* foolish mind to be reasons for behaving as he

does. Spinoza simply says that the free man has adequate ideas; the slave, inadequate. No question of two distinct types of explanation (in the sense of *account*) need arise. If Hollis were in line with Spinoza on this issue, it would be possible to generalize his very fruitful suggestion that the social science theories usually conceived as yielding "laws" might be better reinterpreted as detailing the circumstances in which men make rational decisions—which, given various simplifying assumptions, will turn out to be similar.

Perhaps one cause (reason? motive?) for Hollis's explanatory dualism is desire to rescue free will from determinism, at least for the rational elite. But determinism, if it applies to human beings, does so at the micro level only, and there is no reason to suppose that "sociological laws" can be analyzed as summations of the micro-determinations. Hollis seems to have overlooked this point, supposing that such generalizations as "Suicide varies inversely with the degree of social integration" are on all fours with "Gravitation varies inversely with the square of the distance." This in spite of a long and detailed discussion of determinism.

Despite—or rather, perhaps, because of—its informal faculty-commons-room-conversational style, this short book is not easy going. Hollis's arguments are compressed and his allusions frequently cryptic, at least to this reviewer. Nevertheless, the book is required reading for all behavioral scientists, all philosophers concerned with man and science—that is to say, all philosophers; and indeed, its ideas need to be made accessible to everybody. I do not mean to suggest, however, that some federally funded crash program is called for. For—and this is a supreme compliment to a philosopher—Hollis is only saying what everybody has always known, really.

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