Of agents and patients: mapping human agency via philosophical ontology

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Abstract: Human action seems to be an essentially contested issue. Questions regarding what it is and how to account for it lie at the heart of it. A great number of definitions in a wide array of disciplines attest to the complexity of a fundamental notion for the social sciences. In order to contribute to bring some order to this scenario, this article presents an analysis of human agency from a philosophical ontology, which is logically and necessarily prior to the conventional concept of ontology, best described as scientific. By so doing it, challenges the primacy of ontology over epistemology. Philosophical ontology refers to ways to connect to the world and two are identified and associated to the well-known *erklären* or explaining and *verstehen* or understanding. Agency, seen from these perspectives, takes shape in two extremes: on the one hand, one too robust, and, on the other, one that becomes virtually non-existent, respectively. This analysis not only further supports the but also points to important empirical implications for the study of the human action.

Keywords: agency; ontology; philosophy of science; explaining; understanding.

Introduction

Human agency is an essentially contested notion. Depending on what is considered by agency, the scope and limits of human action are established. There are several approaches to this topic, with important implications for its empirical study from a wide range of disciplines (see e.g. in sociology Blumer 2004, 1969; Archer 2003; Joas 1996; Parsons 1978; in psychology Karwowski and Kaufman 2017; Toumela 1977; in philosophy Brand and Walton 1976; Mead 1972; Langford 1971; in economics Alkire 2009; 2007; Sen 1985; in law Carle 2005). Therefore, instead of trying to provide an additional definition, it seems fruitful to explore the foundations of the debate so as to give order to this state of the question. For this undertaking, a philosophical approach seems useful, to account for the doctrines on which the main ideas of human agency are built. This has intrinsic and instrumental importance.

The intrinsic importance of this analysis lies in the fact that providing greater clarity to the bases on which approaches to the study of human action are built has value in itself. Certainly, the investigation of human being usually assumes (often tacitly) a position with respect to the philosophical foundations of his action. However, when talking about humanity and its agency, it is virtually inevitable that questions such as: what is human action and how do we recognize it when we see it? Or do we even need to see it to know it? How do we account for it, either way? What is the relationship between individuals, and between the individual and society? These questions and many others are the subject of much debate and therefore cannot be taken for granted. Hence, scrutinizing the ideas undergirding different treatments given to agency can elucidate some answers.

Additionally, this discussion is relevant for instrumental reasons as they affect the generation of knowledge. Different notions of human agency, the self, and society subscribe to different philosophical assumptions. The latter become instrumentally relevant to empirical research because they indicate, at least to some degree, what is in the world (questions about being and what exists), how that which exists can be known (questions about how to account for what exists) or even, and presumably more fundamental than the previous ones, how the human being connects to the world. Therefore, clarity on this aspect and an awareness of its implications can contribute to greater coherence in the development of empirical research and the selection of strategies and methods that can contribute to these objectives (Humphreys 2013; Jackson 2011).

In this sense, analyzing human agency suggests a discussion from the philosophy of social sciences. Conventionally, the starting point (assumed as such since there is no prior or prior position) would be ontology, that is, studying what human action is. The traditional structure establishes this as the most basic level and proposes the order to be followed, namely: ontology – epistemology – methods (Sumner and Tribe 2008). However, this would be the starting point only if the approach is *scientific* ontology, which deals with 'what exists' (Bhaskar 1975). However, there is an alternative that is logically prior and therefore also necessarily prior and refers to 'the connection that human beings have with the world'. That is, it is a *philosophical* ontology (Bhaskar 1975) and is the perspective adopted here.

To elaborate that argument, this article is structured in four sections. The first makes a case for a philosophical ontology. The second builds on the previous one and proposes, as a heuristic tool, *erkären* and *verstehen*, explain and understand, respectively, as approaches that include the main ways of 'engaging' with the world in the social sciences. The third section studies human agency from

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each of these approaches. The penultimate section suggests some implications of this analysis both in the abstract as well as for empirical research. The last section concludes.

The strategy: philosophical ontology

This article deals with the human beings and their action. Therefore, the argument to be elaborated favors an ontological approach. However, it is necessary to make a precision with respect to which ontology is used. This article proposes the use of a *philosophical* ontology instead of a *scientific* one. The difference is relevant. Scientific ontology refers to the traditional study of what is or exists in the world (Bhaskar 1975). That is to say, it refers to what can be considered as an inventory of things, objects, processes, facts or factors of whose existence a particular study already has evidence or at least has the expectation that they exist. For its part, philosophical ontology denotes "[…] the conceptual and philosophical basis on which claims about the world are formulated in the first place: ontology as our "hook-up" to the world, so to speak, concerned with how we as researchers are able to produce knowledge in the first place" (Jackson, 2011: 28). In other words, it refers to the connection we have with the world.

This strategy implies questioning the dominant approach, in relation to the structure of scientific research. The convention makes a strict separation between (scientific) ontology, epistemology and methodology, establishing not only a list or structure of a descriptive nature but also an order or ranking of a normative nature. This structure is probably the best known and most popular in research design discussions (see Sumner and Tribe, 2008; Moses and Knutsen, 2012). However, this proposition does not discuss the normativity implicit in it, namely, the primacy of (scientific) ontology over the other two components. In this way, ontological questions (about what is and what exists) are prioritized over epistemological questions (about knowing and how statements about the world can be made) and above aspects related to methods (the techniques used to generate that knowledge about the world and the things that exist in it) (Jackson 2011). Consequently, the conventional approach makes research and its design dependent on the world, which is tantamount to asserting that "[…] it is the nature of objects that determines their cognitive possibilities for us" (Bhaskar, 1998: 25).

This position, perhaps due to its popularity, seems to make sense initially. However, at a second glance, it can be recognized that putting ontology first suffers from the serious problem of assuming what exists, i.e. assuming what constitutes the world. This is problematic because if this is the starting point, then questions regarding ontological claims are implausible (Jackson, 2011). Examples in this sense can be the epistemological question about the validity of the claim or the method question about the technique that should be used to analyze and evaluate that claim (Chernoff in Jackson, 2011). For this reason, scientific ontology is logically and necessarily subordinate to philosophical ontology, which is concerned with our connection with the world. After all statements about what exists acquire greater meaning once the bases on which they are made have been established (Patomäki and Wight, 2000). The corollary of this discussion, perhaps already evident, is that the primacy of ontology derives from the notion of ontology used, that is, a scientific ontology. By questioning this type of ontology and its place in research, the normative ontology-epistemology-methodology structure and order is also questioned.

Consequently, an alternative approach, which favors the discussion from the philosophical ontology, is required. For the purposes of this article, a well-known differentiation on how it is possible to generate knowledge of the world is adopted, namely *erklären* and *verstehen*. That is, explaining and understanding, respectively. However, even in this respect, this article also distances itself from the convention. Presumably, this approach is known because the literature, addressing the production of knowledge in terms of the philosophy of science, uses this distinction to support the division between quantitative and qualitative research and methods. Although the influence of the philosophical foundations in guiding the conduct of empirical research is accepted here, it is also recognized that it does not determine them since they are the product of these foundations but also of conventions (Humphreys, 2013). Consequently, for the elaboration of this argument, a critical position is accepted with respect to a methodological determinism, extending it to the ways in which the knower connects to the world. That is, the present discussion has implications regarding the form that knowledge produced within each perspective takes, however, this does not extend deterministically to the methods and strategies employed in that production.

Two philosophical ontologies: explaining and understanding

Such an undertaking requires criteria that allows comparison with some degree of exhaustiveness as well as parsimony. Comparability is necessary because it is only way in which different approaches, schools and paradigms can be assessed against each other and their scope identified. Some degree of exhaustiveness is advised because, for the insights gained to be useful, at least the major traditions ought to be covered and accommodated in the study. Given the growing diversity of alternatives, full exhaustiveness seems neither required nor plausible. Parsimony is also warranted to facilitate the comparison and bring a modicum of order to the scrutiny. There is, nonetheless, no consensus regarding a framework that can enable that analysis (Jackson 2011).

Hollis' (1994) *The Philosophy of Social Science* is most informative as a starting point. The use of his work is, nonetheless, partial and restricted to the intuitions that are initially established in this important contribution to the literature because they suggest a close approach to a philosophical ontology. Certainly, within the discussion of the philosophy of science there are variants that fit within these two broad approaches, that are addressed below, and many differ in some aspects from the description provided. This is a sign of ongoing debate on this issue and evidence that there is no consensus. Depending on the

discipline, the approaches that can be placed within *erklären* have been called positivism, post-positivism, or naturalism (see e.g. Moses and Knutsen, 2012; della Porta and Keating, 2008), each with its own nuances but all with more common denominators than differentiators. Likewise, those that can be located within *verstehen* have been called constructivism, interpretivism, humanism (see Moses and Knutsen, 2012; della Porta and Keating, 2008). Therefore, the proposal advanced here is best understood as one of 'ideal types' in the Weberian sense. That is, the elements put forward do not strictly exist in reality nor do they reflect the content of history (Käsler, 1998). Consequently, they constitute an instrument to provide an order to the treatments of the agency on clear philosophical foundations and point to some important implications.

At the same time, this text does not attempt to establish a typology. Therefore, it is convenient to consider them as hypothetical constructions and heuristic tools that facilitate the analysis of perspectives that are verified in reality and are found, albeit loosely and partially, within them. That is, despite the differences that some variants may exhibit with respect to the description provided by *erklären* and *verstehen*, presumably what they share or have in common with each of them tips the balance more than what differentiates them. In this sense, the proposal established in these pages does not pretend to be exhaustive of all the ways of studying human agency. However, being a heuristic tool, it does not need to. For the purposes of the argument presented here, it is sufficient to develop an analysis that covers the main approaches and collects their main characteristics in such a way that a comparison can be established systematically and logically. Addressing the treatment given to human beings in the social sciences from the philosophical ontology, in terms of *erklären* and *verstehen*, fulfills this objective.

Erklären or explaining

This position can be considered as the heir to the Enlightenment, modern philosophy and the natural and exact sciences. *Erklären* means 'to explain' with the notion of making sense of a phenomenon in terms of causes and consequences (Moses and Knutsen, 2012). This makes intuitive sense. When a person explains something, they are usually trying to relate a series of events in a causal way. And this is precisely what is meant by the term. The interest in explaining, making sense of the phenomena that the human being perceives in the world, seems to be part of human nature. Indeed, Aristotle famously posited that knowing is inherent to human beings. From the generation of myths in ancestral cultures to some ideas defended by fairly well-established religions throughout history, there is no short supply of examples illustrating this.

However, the defining moment of explaining, which ascribed it its scientific character, can be located in the contributions from Galileo to Newton. It is at this time that the (natural) sciences gained currency over religion and myth when it came to accounting for natural phenomena, by explaining them. The aim of these sciences was to find the truth, in the form of the 'laws that govern the universe' (Moses and Knutsen, 2012). These were understood as absolute, universal, immutable patterns that can be discovered exactly (Garcés, 2016a). Therefore, causality was the main focus of attention. Identifying these causal relationships would make it possible to explain what was perceived but, being laws, it would also make it easier to predict and eventually control natural phenomena (Hollis and Smith, 1992). Reaching this goal was equivalent to discovering the truth, lifting the veil from nature and perceiving it as it is.

That project was supported philosophically by Descartes and Hume. Therefore, this position maintains the Cartesian notion of the separation between mind and matter, seeing them as two different substances (Descartes, 1953). Thus, for Cartesian rationalism, the mind is fundamentally different from the material world. So, it also preserves the idea that knowledge is the result of the search, from the mind, for absolute certainty about the world. This persecution led to the process of absolute doubt and eventually concluded in the Cartesian dictum *cogito ergo sum*.

Additionally, Hume's contribution is significant. The recognition that the senses collect important and necessary information from the world characterizes his empiricism (Garcés, 2016a). By combining with the natural and exact sciences, this project acquired important resources and tools that privilege observation and accuracy. The observation was necessary because phenomena must be perceived in some way and the explanations about them had to be demonstrated in a way that is evident. Accuracy is linked to the first, since the adequate study of a phenomenon and its causes was based on precise measurement and the complex calculations that it facilitates. In this way, the study of the sequential and conjunctural relationship between events was influenced by Hume (Garcés, 2016a; Dicker, 1998; Rosenberg, 1993), who preferred such a description instead of 'causality', which he considered unobservable and therefore outside the purview of science.

In this sense, the separation of mind and matter leads to the position that there is an external world, one that is independent of the mind. Additionally, it posits that the world can be known as it is. Thus, this entails the recovery of the relevance of human experience to know the world (Moses and Knutsen, 2012; Jackson, 2011).

The implications of this are evident nowadays. A clear illustration is the search for objectivity as a characteristic of scientific rigor (della Porta and Keating, 2008). It is only possible to achieve objectivity if it is possible to know the external world as it is, since objectivity is a characteristic of the world. Put differently, objectivity can be a goal only if it is assumed that it is independent of the subjects or of those who observe it and that they have direct access to it.

As a consequence of the above, only those statements that reflected (quite literally, like a mirror) that mind-independent world could be considered as (scientific) knowledge, since only they constituted 'the truth'. Evidence of this is the suggestion, mainly dominant at the beginning of the 20th century within the positivist project of the Vienna Circle (Ayer, 1959), that scientific statements must observe the form of general laws or covering laws (Uebel, 2014; Gorksy, 2013). Imitating the natural sciences, this implied that in the social sciences the goal is also to discover the universal laws that govern the social

world, which maintains the primacy of causality (Comte, 2009), i.e. explaining the social world. In this sense, when studying society in general and the human being in particular, the project of pursuing the truth and certainty as external absolutes and independent of the human mind is preserved.

That being so, the generation of knowledge favors, but is not exclusively restricted to, procedures related to positivism. Examples of this are: hypothesis testing, and falsification. Hypothesizing implies the formulation of affirmations whose validity is uncertain. This is why conventionally these are formulated as conditionals. Therefore, it is necessary to explore the validity of these claims. The test that hypotheses must pass is that of empirical evidence. Furthermore, to verify the scope of the validity of proposals that pass the test, the established strategy is their falsification (Garcés, 2016a). This means subjecting them to increasingly stringent tests and, in particular, generating the conditions under which precisely those claims would not be verified (Popper, 2002a). Those that pass more tests are considered to have greater empirical content (Popper, 2002b). From the positivist perspective, this is how knowledge grows. It is a process of marginal increments. Again, the standard of these tests is the evidence, that is, that which is observable. After all, "testing is what matters" (Hollis and Smith, 1992: 53). Thus, hypothesis testing only makes sense under the premise that there is an external world, which is real and objective, independent of the human mind, because only if this is assumed is there a parameter against which an assertion can be confirmed (Jackson 2011) and verified if it reflects (like a mirror) that world.

Probably the best illustration of this position is provided by Milton Friedman (1953) in his *The Methodology of Positive Economics*. In this text, a defense of positivism and its dominance in the discipline of economics is established. He asserts that the focus must be on objectivity, in his words: "[p]ositive economics is in principle independent of any particular ethical position or normative judgements" (Friedman, 1953: 4). He argues that the main objective of a positivistic science is the generation of theories or hypotheses that provide exact predictions about phenomena not yet observed. In this sense, these must be judged in terms of their predictive power with respect to the things they try to explain. The final test is dictated by human experience, that is, observation. If those theories and hypotheses are not contradicted by empirical evidence, they are considered valid. This validity increases to the extent that they overcome successive challenges or occasions of contradiction and the more demanding those occasions have been. If, in this process, they are contradicted by the evidence, then they are rejected.

This approach has proven to be very influential, so much so that it is considered orthodoxy in the social sciences (Gorsky, 2013). Particularly, some branches of economics fully subscribe to the principles of positivism and, therefore, also to its methods and procedures. Caldwell (1994: 4) put it best stating: "[f]ew economists keep up with developments in the philosophy of science, and as such it is understandable that many may still labor under the illusion that economics is, or can be, a positivist discipline". In practice, and derived from the discussion carried out so far, this tradition can be summarized in the following terms: i) the belief in the unity of science, that is, that there is no fundamental difference between natural and social sciences; ii) a strict adherence to the differentiation and separation of facts and values, which implies that the objective world (devoid of value judgments) can be known as it is; iii) the belief that in the social world, as in the natural world, there are quasi-laws or regularities that justify the use of the designs, strategies and methods of the natural sciences in the social sciences; and, iv) adequate research is only that based on empirical validation and falsification (Smith, 1996).

Verstehen or understanding

Diametrically opposed to *erklären* or explaining is *verstehen* or understanding. Contrary to the premises established by the former, the latter rejects the difference and separation between substances as they are not believed to be fundamentally different. In fact, from this perspective, the mind and the material are interrelated. Because the mind is part of the world, the latter contains it and cannot be separated from it. That is, the mind is a constitutive part of the world (della Porta and Keating, 2008). Thus, the knower and the known are interrelated to such an extent that the observer is part of the observed. In other words, the knower constitutes the world in the act of knowing it. Therefore, the mind is not an entity separate from the world, as something that can hypothetically be isolated from its environment. On the contrary, the mind exists in the world and therefore is part of it. This being the case, this position rejects the idea that the world exists independently of the mind and that it is possible to generate objective, certain or true (absolute, universal, immutable) knowledge. Such an assumption, from this perspective, makes no sense because the activities carried out to study the world turn out to make up the world themselves, since they are part of it and, when carried out, they become a constitutive element and produce it. The conclusion of this proposal is that the pursuit of absolute certainty or 'the truth' is useless, it is an unrealistic undertaking that causes the so-called 'Cartesian anxiety' (Bernstein, 1983), as it is a futile endeavor. There is no such thing as a neutral position or a 'point from nowhere' from which the world can be known as it is, because whenever the world is known this is done by the human mind, and this necessarily implies a biased or prejudiced position. That is, the mind is the product of human experience and is made up of everything that allows us to make the world intelligible (Moses and Knutsen, 2012). Therefore, what the world is, or rather what it means, depends on the mind knowing it.

In this sense, explaining and understanding have different notions of 'the world'. While *erklären* assumes that it is an inventory of things, *verstehen* regars the world as made up of a series of facts, that is, interpretations of what is perceived by human experience. Thus, the object of scientific study also changes. That which is researched ceases to be only a meaningless entity that the researcher perceives with his senses (and other instruments used to enhance them) and that can be accurately observed and

measured. Instead, it is viewed as always permeated and filled with both intentional and conceptual content (Moses and Knutsen, 2012). While the intentional content refers to the interests and preferences of the researcher, the conceptual denotes his theories and even his creativity. Thus, the 'world' is a component of people's practical experience and, therefore, this experience (scientific or not) constantly constructs the world. Consequently, trying to match mental representations and statements with the world is meaningless (Jackson, 2008), since statements can only reflect those representations, not the world as it is, for there is no direct (mindless) access to it.

This change in the conception of the objects of study is also attested in how they are approached. If the idea of an external world full of things that can be known in themselves, i.e. as they are, is given up, how knowledge is produced also changes. If the world and the knower are one and if the latter and its activities are constitutive of the former, then knowledge is only produced through those activities. Because knowledge can only be the product of the practical activity of people in the world, the objects of study are those activities themselves (Jackson, 2008). That is, by recognizing the unity of the world and the person, the only thing that can be studied are the perceptions that people generate of the world. This study also implies giving up the exclusive study of what is considered, from the *erklären* perspective, as objective and observable. Investigating people's interpretations and their practices implies studying their subjectivities (Moses and Knutsen, 2012). These, in turn, are not necessarily amenable to exact measurement. In this way, valid knowledge of facts that are, in principle, unobservable, undetectable or imperceptible can be generated.

Hence, knowledge produced from this perspective requires the researcher's awareness of, at least, the following aspects: his research practices, the broader organizational and social context in which his scientific activity is located and the effects that the former can have on the latter (Jackson 2011). This implies recognizing that knowledge is inseparable from the social location and practices of the researcher. However, and at the same time, knowledge cannot be reduced to them. Since there is no external world that imposes limits on knowledge, it does not seek to represent or reflect (like a mirror) 'reality'. Instead, statements are value-laden since they inevitably contain the researcher's social position (della Porta and Keating, 2008). The latter, in turn, is composed of various logics of social differentiation, for example, ethnicity, age, gender, class, among others. In this sense, knowledge is always 'prejudiced'. Accordingly, the product of research must show awareness of these biases and prejudices, not the least because knowledge can contribute to strengthening or weakening them (Jackson 2011). In other words, knowledge is reflexive.

This position posits that knowledge about organizations and social structures does not begin with the world, but with the person himself (Jackson, 2011). Thus, the systematic analysis of their role as producers of knowledge and the location of their work in relation to the broader social context will produce valid knowledge about: i) the things that are part of the human experience; and, ii) the social structures and contexts that produce these experiences. In light of this, the rigorous and explicit, although also always partial and limited, self-awareness and reflection distinguished this perspective.

If *erklären* is the orthodoxy in the social sciences, *verstehen* is the main heterodoxy (Gorsky, 2013). As in the previous case, there are many traditions and variants that can fit under this label, but what they all have in common is the rejection of the idea of the unity of science, which suggests that the social sciences have to follow the model proposed by the natural sciences. Instead, they are seen as radically different. While the natural world can be known in terms of the laws that govern it, the social world is studied in terms of meanings and interpretations, which are what rules society (Moses and Knutsen, 2012; della Porta and Keating, 2008). Thus, while the natural sciences are interested in explaining causes and consequences, favoring the study of causality, the social sciences are concerned with making the social world understandable through hermeneutical means (Gorsky, 2013). In other words, the search for truth is abandoned and replaced by the reconstruction of meanings, intentions, and motivations. As such, language is the focus of analysis since all perceptions and meanings depend on it. Simply put, the world is what language determines it to be.

By way of illustration, it should be noted that there are versions within this approach that take the argument even further. They not only affirm that social reality is linguistically constituted but, and this is essential, they locate the natural sciences within social life as well. In this way, both the natural and the social sciences are governed by 'discourses' and 'powers' (Peet and Hartwick, 2009). According to these variants, we are all so deeply involved in our own 'histories' and 'language games' that there is no neutral, objective or real position from which they can be judged. For this reason, these variants subscribe to an epistemic relativism (Gorsky, 2013). According to them, language is the axis around which everything turns. The analysis focuses on meanings, intentions, and motivations. Furthermore, regarding the search for certainty and truth, for these perspectives, representational theories are not only wrong but dangerous (Peet and Hartwick, 2009). These are wrong because the human being lacks direct access to a world independent of the mind. The relationship between the mind and the world is mediated by language and, therefore, the play and handling of language creates what is adopted as truth. Likewise, these theories are dangerous because they reflect the point of view of an observer who is necessarily prejudiced and, if adopted as true, being loaded with values (specific to that observer's position) reflect his interests and preferences, probably in detriment of others.

Human agency: explained and understood

On the basis of the previous discussion, which has outlined the main characteristics of explaining and understanding, as distinguishable approaches from a philosophical ontology, this section develops the implications of each one for the study of human agency. In this discussion, in addition to addressing the treatment that the human being receives in each scheme, what this means for

its relationship with society is also elaborated. Finally, in both cases, an attempt is made to suggest some of the main implications for the empirical investigation of human agency.

Explaining agency

Erklären has a robust proposition regarding human agency. In it, human beings are the center of everything. Following the separation of substances elaborated in the previous section, the mind makes the human being fundamentally different from the world, from everything that surrounds him and, therefore, has a privileged place (Archer, 2003). Human beings are not only separate from nature but are above of it. From this perspective, there is a coexistence of entities. On one side is the world, which is external to the mind and therefore objective, and on the other side is the human being, with consciousness. Reality is presented to the human being through consciousness, which reflects that reality or world. The implications are important. Human beings are not only outside the world, but being outside of reality, he is also outside of history. As such, the context (social or environmental) and even relationships with other human beings do not affect the self. Thus, the self follows the tradition of modernity and "[…] is not contingently made but is universally given" (Archer, 2003: 23).

Additionally, according to this position, human beings have a common characteristic that defines and distinguishes them, and that is treated as something given, namely, reason. This is the contribution of the Enlightenment and its idea of (European) reason as a common property of human beings, and its emancipator (Peet and Hartwick, 2009). Being a given trait, according to the tradition of modern philosophy, this quality is immutable and universal. There is only one 'reason' (or rationality) in the world and it is the same regardless of place, time or any other factor. That being so, it cannot be influenced in any way by the context in which people live, the social structure in which they find themselves or even the physical conditions of the environment that surrounds them. In other words, that external and mind-independent world cannot exert any influence on human beings.

This is the well-known image of the rational human being or *homo economicus*. Therefore, human beings are one and characterized by their logocentrism. That is to say, their very being has got rid of everything that is contingent. This common characteristic differentiates human beings from their environment and justifies treating and studying them as fundamentally homogeneous, independent of the world, whether the latter refers to geographical, historical or social aspects.

This position has important implications for the relationship between the individual and society. According to it, the individual is prior to society. Society it is made up of individuals and, thus, is nothing more than an aggregate of individuals (Bhargava, 1992). The individual is the primary unit and society is just an epiphenomenon of it. That is, society shares and reflects the characteristics of the individual, mainly their rationality. Consequently, this position is illustrated by methodological individualism, which suggests that society can be fully explained through the sum of the individuals that compose it (Robeyns, 2005; 2008). As a result, individuals are the highest constituents of social reality and, therefore, society can be reduced to its individuals.

Agency is robust and it can be explained objectively. Human beings, due to their rationality, have the privilege of enjoying considerable freedom. Not only that, but they also have extensive control over themselves and their environment to carry out their decisions, pursuing their interests and preferences, usually related to maximizing their utility. Although there are different views regarding what is considered complete rationality, the literature has seemingly found some agreement on at least three characteristics, namely, that i) preferences are well defined and decisions or choices are made based on to maximize them; ii) preferences accurately reflect the costs and benefits of all available options; and, iii) in case of uncertainty, people have well-constructed beliefs about how that uncertainty will be resolved (Camerer et al., 2003). Consequently, from this perspective, it makes sense to study agents based solely on choices. This entails the use of theories related to the idea of 'revealed preferences' since, based on the aforementioned assumptions, choice provides all the necessary and relevant information to know the agent. These properties, in light of the anthropocentrism (in the most literal sense) mentioned above, suggest that there is an instrumental relationship between the human being and the world or nature. Put succinctly, the world is at the service of the human being (Archer, 2003). Therefore, the human being is an agent in every sense of the word[2].

Understanding agency

Verstehen, as is to be expected in light of the previous discussion, has a notion of agency that is antipodal to the previous position. Since post-modern and post-structuralist traditions fall under this umbrella, this position rejects the inheritance of European modernity, which seems to reduce human beings to reason and rationality. Consequently, *verstehen* emphasizes that both are human creations and constructions, not a given. Additionally, from this position, knowledge is influenced by the characteristics and context of human beings. Therefore, the ideas of reason and rationality are influenced by the particular circumstances surrounding those who created them. Derrida (1971: 213) exemplifies it forcefully when he states that "the white man takes his own mythology, Indo-European mythology, his own logos, that is, the mythos of his idiom, for the universal form of that he must still wish to call Reason". In other words, the idea of a single universal reason as the common denominator of humanity is given up. As such, the very idea that there is a single characteristic capable of completely defining the human being, independent of other circumstances, is abandoned.

Furthermore, some traditions reject reason as the source of emancipation. On the contrary, reason is seen as a form of social control. It is argued that there is a relationship between power and notions of truth and knowledge (Peet and Hartwick, 2009). In this threefold dynamic, reason and science exercise control over virtually every aspect of life, thereby saturating all of human ex-

perience. Due to this, human beings increasingly question their behavior, feelings, choices and even preferences, when they do not fit with the established logic. This is attested both in the public sphere and in the private space, also reaching the intimacy of the self. Therefore, reason does not liberate humanity but discipline and structure it according to the established format of rationality. Thus, this position seeks to highlight the subjugated and oppressed aspects of human beings that, by privileging reason and rationality, have been sacrificed. Among these aspects can be found emotion and pleasure. Thus, the idea of a unified rational individual is abandoned and, in its place, emerges a "socially and linguistically decentered and fragmented subject with multiple identities" (Peet and Hartwick, 2009: 201).

Consequently, language acquires prominence. This position turns the previous anthropocentrism on its head and instead of establishing that meanings are generated by human beings, it posits that the former create the latter. The human being becomes a linguistic vehicle. This highlights the importance of language. Linguistic systems determine the subject, what they perceive or not (and what exists for them or not). Hence, they make the world intelligible to the individual. As such, they dictate the world of possibilities for people, what they can be and what they can do, that is, their agency. According to this position, "nothing in the mind that was not first in the conversation" (Harré, 1983: 116).

The implications for the individual's relationship with society are far-reaching. Since human beings are a creation of meanings, the human being is what the society in which they live, dictates through language. Consequently, human beings has limited agency, determined by language, and becomes a patient rather than an agent. The centrality of language hides the individual in society (Archer, 2003). Indeed, the perception of individuality or of the self, that the individual may have, is related to the linguistic management of the first person (of the 'I'). In the extreme, this position is exemplified by methodological holism, which proposes that this patient is fully explained by society. This is the highest constituent of social reality, because it constructs language, and therefore individuals can be reduced to society.

Implications for the conduct of inquiry

The proposal put forward here facilitates a critique of one of the best-established notions in social research, what can be called the *trias academica*: ontology, epistemology, and methods. An analysis from the traditional perspective, as argued above, by proposing a structure that subordinates epistemology to (scientific) ontology, presents limitations that prevent an adequate inference of the scope of the distinction between modern and postmodern thought and, eventually, also of its implications for empirical studies. Perhaps the most relevant result, and probably the least conspicuous, is to perpetuate the idea of the need for that structure. By assuming this structure as the basis of the investigation of the social world, a critique of that structure itself is prevented. However, as can perhaps be inferred from the argument presented in this article, this challenge is useful.

Indeed, if for *verstehen*, which finds great coincidence with the postmodern tradition[3], there is no separation between the mind and the world or there is no such dualism, then epistemology, at least conceived in modern terms, it is unnecessary. By the same token, it can be associated with poststructuralism[4]. Epistemology, for *erklären*, is in charge of studying how what exists can be known (once what exists is established, which is the field of scientific ontology). Within that proposal, what exists is separated from the mind. Therefore, the task entrusted to epistemology is to establish the bridge between the mind and the world (Taylor, 1995). However, if one abandons the assumption that the mind and the world are two distinct substances, and instead assumes that the mind is a constitutive part of the world, as understanding or *verstehen* does, then the project of epistemology, conventionally conceived, loses meaning. The result of this is that it also makes no sense to uncritically assume the ontology-epistemology-methods structure as the design in terms of the philosophy of science on which all social research must be built. In this sense, taking a step further back and approaching the study of the social from ontological philosophy, as has been done in this case when analyzing human agency, seems more promising.

Furthermore, but related to the above, the empirical study of society makes assumptions about the nature of human beings, about their agency. Different designs, strategies, instruments and techniques are more or less suitable for this study depending on the assumptions made. Although a discussion of methods is beyond the scope of this article, perhaps it is enough to mention that different methods facilitate the investigation of the social world within the positions generated by different philosophical ontologies. This implies that a method or technique can potentially be useful both to explain and to understand, depending on its application (Humphreys 2013). This certainly goes beyond the questionable division of quantitative and qualitative methods and their strict and exclusive link with each one (explaining and understanding, respectively, and by inference from what was discussed above, also with modernity and postmodernity). Different methods, to different extents and even in different combinations, can be used in relation to each position, according to the assumptions made. Interesting efforts in this regard are certainly mix-methods but beyond them there are also multi-method approaches such as qualitative comparative analysis, which poses a challenge to the quantitative-qualitative divide (Ragin 2008; 2000), and by so doing it also seems to challenge the *verstehen-erklären* framework (see e.g. Garcés 2016b, and for implications in policy analysis see e.g. Garcés 2019; Garcés-Velástegui 2022c). This stresses the fact that the positions elaborated above are ideal types and that rather than seeing them as black-and-white, it seems useful to recognize the gray area between them (see Figure 1). This entails a promising avenue for future research.

Hence, it should be emphasized that explaining and understanding, as proposed here, constitute a heuristic of ideal types that describe diametrically opposed positions, not necessarily existing in reality. That is to say, they are not unique positions or positions of 'all or nothing', where if an investigation is not fully within one, it is necessarily

fully in the other. Rather, this implies that there are other positions along a continuous spectrum where the approaches described above are just the extremes. Therefore, the form that empirical studies take and the methods that are used to do so will vary according to where the assumptions they make about human agency place them on that spectrum.

Conclusion

To discuss human agency entails a description of human beings. At first, this seems to suggest a fundamental discussion of an ontological nature, that is, of what is, of what exists. Although this article agrees with that intuition, it also distances itself from the convention and proposes to go one step further back than what is usually considered as the initial step in the philosophy of science. Traditionally, the research design scheme establishes as the chronological and logical structure: ontology-epistemology-methodology, where ontology, understood as *scientific* ontology, has primacy over the other elements. Against this scheme, this article has argued that it is more fruitful to start with a *philosophical* ontology. While scientific ontology deals with what is and what exists, philosophical ontology focuses on the connection or 'hook up' human beings have with the world. Therefore, this is logically and necessarily prior to establishing what exists. Consequently, it constitutes a more useful starting point for a philosophical discussion of the study of human beings and their action.

For an analysis in this sense, two broad schemes have been considered that account for that connection with the world, namely, *erklären* or explaining and *verstehen* or understanding. Explaining represents the heritage of the tradition of modernity and the success of the natural sciences. Therefore, at the extreme, his project entails the pursuit of knowledge as absolute certainty and truth as universal and immutable. More mainstream versions have settled for the search of regularities, building over the same foundations. They all seem to assume the separation of the mind and the world, considering the latter as external and independent of the former. Thus, the world is objective and since it can be studied as it is, objectivity is possible. The product of this project is to lift the veil of the world and identify the universal laws that govern it. For this, the center of the study is the relationships of causes and consequences. Understanding, on the other hand, implies a diametrically opposed position. According to this perspective, the world and the mind are one. So, human activity is constitutive of the world. Because there is no world independent of the mind, the object of study is that activity itself. Therefore, the focus is on studying people's meanings and interpretations, placing the focus language for that undertaking. To achieve this goal, the perceptions of human beings are analyzed, that is, their subjectivity.

The application of explaining and understanding to the study of human agency has generated important findings. When seeking to explain the human being, the intention is to study causal relationships associated with it. The result is an anthropocentric scheme in the most literal sense. Here, human beings are the center of the analysis and are capable of effectively pursuing (causing) their goals. This is achieved thanks to a universal quality that homogenizes all humanity: reason and rationality. The human being, then, is an agent in the full sense of the word. Understanding human beings, on the other hand, implies recognizing the complexity and heterogeneity of individuals. This requires studying the facts through the meanings they have for them. Therefore, here language is at the center of the analysis. Since language is a social construction, it is society that makes the individual and the latter is restricted to what the former dictates. Therefore, human beings are rather a patient, since they have a limited agency.

While the jury is still out regarding an adequate philosophical ontology scheme to be applied (see e.g. Moses and Knutsen 2012; Jackson 2011; Hollis 1994), there are growing efforts to engage with this type of discussion and even expand the possible philosophies beyond explaining and understanding, to the inclusion of critical realism (see e.g. Smith and Seward 2009) and pragmatism (see e.g. Garcés 2020b) applied to different fields. These positions (and traditions) have implications for empirical research of the social world. Students in the social sciences will do well to ensure that their research design, strategies, and even the instruments employed are consistent with the assumptions about agency that they make. In this sense, it is advisable to know the extremes addressed in this article and properly place each specific study on that spectrum.

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Notes

[1] This point denotes the milestone from which returning to previous states is virtually impossible.

[2] Of late, there have been relevant development in multiple fields that challenge this tradition and seem to move towards more moderate positions. Even within the quintessentially positivist discipline of economics, there are increasing critiques about the validity of the *homo economicus*. An early challenge was posed by Amartya Sen and his capability approach (see e.g. Sen, 2002; 1977; Garcés-Velástegui, 2022a; 2020; Garcés 2020a). Perhaps the most noteworthy and influential work in this regard has been carried by behavioral economics (see e.g. Thaler and Sunstein, 2021; Thaler, 2015; Kahnemann, 2011; and for a combination of the capability approach and behavioral economics see Garcés Velástegui forthcoming; 2022b)

[3] "Postmodernism […] can be understood as a refusal to accept the notions of "objective knowledge" and "universal truth" and as an attempt to challenge the optimistic belief that there are, even in principle, solutions to all our problems" (Chernoff 2007: 154).

[4] "Poststructuralism is a […] family of theories that are radically opposed to rationalism, naturalism, and the scientific approach to the social sciences" (Chernoff 2007: 153).