

HOLISM AND THE ISSUE OF CAUSALITY

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I

In an essay entitled "Holism Versus Individualism," Professor Ernest Gellner endeavors to advance the cause of Holism by exposing certain confusions committed by the Individualist. In the main, these alleged confusions concern the possibility of causal interaction between social wholes and human individuals. I shall, in the course of this essay, endeavor to present Gellner's arguments and show that said arguments are insufficient to show the causal efficacy of social wholes.

According to Gellner, the Individualist, in the main, confuses the relationship of particular and general with the relationship of parts and wholes in his anticausal thesis regarding social wholes. Gellner provides two series, each representing the respective relationship mentioned above, in an attempt to illustrate the Individualist's mistake. The relationship of particular and general is exemplified by a set of statements the first of which puts forth information concerning a single human individual. This is followed by a general statement in terms of the members of constituents of a group of which the single human individual mentioned in the preceding statement is a member. This, in turn, is followed by a more general statement of the same sort. For example: "Jones is going to Germany," "All the members of the platoon (of which Jones is a member) are going to Germany," etc. This may be schematized as follows: (1) X is A, (2) all the members of Y, of which X is a member, are A, (3) all the members of Z, of which Y is a subset and X a member, are A. The truth value relationship between these three

statements is such that if (3) is correct, (1) must be correct. The truth of the former statement is logically necessary for the truth of the latter ones. According to Gellner, to speak of causality in the above instance would be, at the very least, extremely misleading. X is not caused to be A by all the members of Y, of which X is included, being A. Part of what is meant when saying that all the members of Y are A is that X is A. X being A is not something in addition to or separate from all the members of Y being A. It would be redundant to add after saying that all the members of Y are A, that X is A, given of course that X is a member of Y.

The second series provided by Gellner, which delineates the relationship of parts and wholes, is composed of terms the first of which denotes a part of that entity referred to by the following concept. Using the above example, X, Y, and Z compose parts and wholes, i.e., X is a part of Y while Y is a part of Z. The relationship of parts and wholes is such that the truth value of a statement concerned with Z would entail the truth value of some statements concerned with Y although not necessarily all the possible statements concerned with Y as in the first series. Z may be A without all the members of Y being A even though Z being A entails that Y is A. The series concerned with parts and wholes differs from the series concerned with the particular and general in that while the first series speaks of a group in terms of all of its members, the second series speaks of a group as a whole, complex or pattern without necessary reference to all of the members. In terms of the second series, a company may go to Germany without Jones, who is a member of the company, going to Germany.

Given that we often speak of social wholes in terms of generalities (series one) and in terms of wholes (series two), confusions easily arise by way of attributing to the second series those attributes appropriate only to the first series. This confusion between the first and second series, according to Gellner, pervades Individualism, and it may be eliminated simply by realizing that there are two different notions of social wholes. Gellner argues that while the latter members of the first series are not logical candidates for causal ascription with regard to the earlier members, this situation need not obtain for the latter members of the second series with regard to the earlier members. There is no reason "in logic or fact" to support the Individualist's contention that social wholes in terms of the second series are not candidates for causal ascription. Inasmuch as social wholes may be properly interpreted as complexes, then "... their fates qua fates of complexes can nevertheless be the

initial conditions or include final conditions of a causal sequence."¹ It matters little whether or not social wholes have actually ever been or ever will be mentioned in the *implicans* of a causal conditional, the important point Gellner is making is that no logical errors are committed if social wholes are referred to in the *implicans*.

It would appear from the above argument that although wholes in the first series are abstractions, whole in the second series are not;² and insofar as ontological status, according to tradition Individualist's arguments, was denied social wholes in virtue of their being interpreted merely as abstractions, Gellner's discussion concerning the causal efficacy of social wholes may be taken as sufficient for our being at least skeptical about the Individualist's denial.³ In particular, the Individualist's denial may be impugned in the following manner. While it is true that a statement concerning a social whole is true only insofar as a certain number of statements about the germane parts, i.e., humans, is also true, this does not imply that statements concerned with social wholes may now be interpreted merely as a conjunction of statements about human individuals. There is, as Gellner argues, a prodigious mistake committed if one believes that, "All the men in the square were excited," is equivalent to "There was an atmosphere of tension in the square."⁴ Although the truth value of the latter statement is dependent upon the truth value of some statements concerned with human behavior in the appropriate spatial and temporal setting, to construe the statement about the atmosphere as being equivalent to the statement which refers to all the individual humans in the square is to again extrapolate aspects of Gellner's first series onto the second series. Such an extrapolation would render the atmosphere a mere abstraction from human behavior and not only is such an interpretation spurious but, according to Gellner, the atmosphere is a pattern which may be "reacted to" and is consequently "really there." Thus,

¹ Gellner, p.258. (References are to the Bibliography on p.91).

² It might be interesting to note the similarities between Gellner's use of "whole" and Popper's second sense of "whole" in his distinction between wholes as totalities and wholes as a unifying property. Popper, p.76.

³ Watkins is not guilty of the mistake noted by Gellner. Watkins simply maintains that "... the ultimate constituents of the social world are individual people..." Consequently, rock bottom explanation must be phrased in terms of the ultimate constituents. Watkins' position nevertheless encounters troubles in that he wishes Individualism to be 'non vacuous' yet the ultimate constituent thesis is presented a priori. Watkins, p.270. Watkins' view stands in contrast to the Individualist's position presented by Lukes, p.79, and Danto, p.266.

⁴ This is essentially the same point made by Wisdom, p.292.

social wholes need not be construed as the result of human actions but rather that upon which human actions "depend."

If it were the case that a social individual were to be identified as a mere collection of human individuals, then to explain the behavior of a social whole one would need only to explain the behavior of human individuals. But, as Gellner contends, rather than explain, one only illustrates a social whole's behavior by referring to the conduct of humans. In fact it may very well be the case that to explain human conduct, one might be forced to present an "institutional" rather than a "psychological" analysis.⁵ It is conceivable that there are no psychological differences between human individuals from two cultures where the social institutions are very different. Differences in social wholes just may not be detectable in human psychology. An explanation of a social phenomenon might have to be in terms appropriate to social wholes rather than the psychological make-up of the human constituents.

II

Gellner poses as an example of the causal influence exerted by a social whole over human individuals, a situation where, a human (Jones) is caused to go to Germany by the unanimity among his comrades. This is a remark concerned with causality; not logical relations, i.e., it is not being asserted that Jones must go to Germany for without Jones there is no unanimity. Nor is the above a remark to the effect that Jones has been influenced to depart for Germany by every single member of the group. It seems palpable that Gellner's distinction between wholes and generalizations is important in this example for it is maintained that unanimity qua unanimity caused Jones to relocate. Unanimity is not to be interpreted as the summation of individual being within the group for that would render unanimity a mere generalization. Rather, unanimity is to be interpreted as a pattern which may be reacted to. It is thus the pattern of the group and not any individual or combination of individuals within the group which influenced Jones to X. As a pattern of group behavior, rather than the conjunction of constituent, unanimity can, as Gellner has suggested, be causally efficacious. The importance of the whole/generalization distinction is

⁵ Lukes also appears to believe that Individualism is psychologically directed, p.83-ff. Nevertheless Agassi, p.251-261; Popper, p.152-158, and Watkins have argued persuasively that Psychologism cannot be identified with Individualism.

also evident in Gellner's second example, that an individual may be causally influenced by the tense atmosphere in the square. The atmosphere is not to be interpreted in terms of generality, i.e., in terms of the actual behavior of the human individual within the square. The tense atmosphere is to be interpreted, as with unanimity, as the pattern of the group rather than the summation of human individuals within the group, and as a patterns may be reacted to, unanimity and atmosphere may causally influence human behavior.

There is, to be sure, a certain plausibility to Gellner's argument. If unanimity and atmosphere are patterns of the group as a whole and as such may be reacted to, then the group or social individual may causally determine the behavior of the human constituents. Yet, there appears to be a significant distinction which Gellner apparently has overlooked. From merely the pattern displayed by a group as a whole, it is not obvious that the pattern is not something abstracted from the constituent's behavior rather than something to which constituent behavior must conform.⁶ Being a pattern of behavior manifested by the group is insufficient to exclude the interpretation that such a pattern is not merely an abstraction from the constituent's behavior. When we speak of a pattern of behavior, be it attributed to a single individual or a group, we usually mean the general direction of the actual behavior. Inasmuch as a statement concerned with a group's behavior entails reference to the behavior of human individuals in virtue of human behavior being the only means of detecting the behavior of a social whole, then the pattern of behavior may merely be the general direction of human behavior. Thus, if unanimity and atmosphere are interpreted as a 'pattern of' behavior and there is no logical reason for supposing the pattern of behavior to be anything above and beyond the generalization of the constituent's behavior, then unanimity and atmosphere may be merely an abstraction from the manifested human behavior.

It is however, doubtful that Gellner has this notion of pattern in mind when he argues that patterns of the group can causally influence human behavior. A sufficient reason for disregarding the above interpretation is Gellner's contention that patterns of the group may be reacted to; and if 'patterns of' are abstractions, then they are not related causally to the constituent's behavior. The sort of pattern Gellner is considering might be a 'pattern for' behavior. A 'pattern for' behavior not only may be reacted to inasmuch as it prescribes behavior but it will also satisfy Gellner's contention that a group pattern is not an abstraction from the constituent's behavior.⁷

⁶ This point is also made against Wisdom's thesis by Brown, p.299.

⁷ A 'pattern for' might also satisfy Wisdom's notion of an emergent.

A 'pattern for', that is, may be conformed to or transgressed and thus reacted to; and a 'pattern for' cannot, in virtue of being a prescription for behavior, be identified with all the conforming behavior even if the conforming behavior should exhaust the actual behavior of the group's constituents. Nevertheless, it is not certain that the pattern of a group, interpreted as a 'pattern for' behavior, could ever be a candidate for the protasis of a conditional expressing a causal relation. That something may be reacted to is not sufficient to show that that which is reacted to possesses causal efficacy.⁸ One may, for instance, react to a 'pattern for' behavior by either conforming to the pattern or transgressing the prescription. In either case the 'pattern for' behavior may be relevant to the actual behavior but insofar as both may follow from, i.e., be reactions to, the pattern neither can be the causal outcome of the pattern. To ascribe causal efficacy to a 'pattern for' behavior is to suggest that what caused the conformity could have equally caused the transgression, and this employment of "cause" would surely be a neologism. One does not causally explain the conforming behavior or the behavior by appealing to something which might be connected to both. If Gellner's notion of a group pattern is a 'pattern of' behavior, then Gellner has failed to show that a group's pattern is anything above and beyond the generalization of the constituent's behavior. If, on the other hand, a group pattern refers to a 'pattern for' behavior, then although such a pattern may be distinguished from the actual manifested behavior of the constituents and may also be reacted to by the constituents, Gellner has failed to show that a group pattern could ever be the causal impetus of human behavior. If the above is correct, then Gellner has supplied insufficient argument to show that a social whole may be ascribed causal responsibility for human conduct.

Should Gellner's position regarding the causal efficacy of social wholes prove incorrect, it does not affect his contention that we cannot explain group behavior by appeal to the behavior of human individuals for such an appeal will only illustrate rather than explain the behavior of a social whole. If, that is, a social whole cannot be employed to causally explain the conduct of humans, it does not follow that human individuals are thereby causally responsible for the behavior of a social whole. Gellner's reasons for believing that

⁸ If I am not mistaken, Lukes is guilty of the same mistake, i.e., thinking that causal explanations and explanations by identification are of the same sort. To make intelligible by appeal to linguistic relation is not the same as to make intelligible by appeal to causal relation. See Lukes, p.84. The confusion between the logical reduction of terms and the empirical reduction of causal laws similarly troubles Wisdom's analysis. See Wisdom, p.274, 292-294.

human behavior cannot be implemented to explain the behavior of a social whole is apparently based upon his contention that although wholes are quite different from generalizations, a statement concerned with a whole entails some statements concerning the parts. Consequently, any statement which described the behavior of the whole, the part's behavior would merely register or illustrate the behavior of the whole.

There is unfortunately somewhat of an ambiguity in Gellner's thesis concerning the causal ineptitude of human individuals. By illustrating the behavior of a group Gellner may mean that a description of human behavior is logically sufficient for the description of the behavior of the group. If human behavior is an illustration of the behavior of the whole in the sense that a description of the whole's behavior entails a description of constituent behavior, then Gellner is correct in maintaining that human behavior cannot cause group behavior. In this sense, a description of human behavior is always the description of a part of constituent and as such is logically sufficient for the description of the appropriate whole's behavior. It is of course true that when we maintain that X entails Y, Y is though necessary for X. In Gellner's presentation human behavior is entailed by the behavior of social wholes and consequently, human behavior would be necessary for the whole's behavior rather than the other way about as I have suggested. Nevertheless, group behavior may be logically necessary for human behavior and still entail the manifestation of human behavior. This relationship would be similar to that which obtains between awareness and the manifestation of awareness. Awareness is logically necessary for the manifestation of awareness and yet awareness entails frequent manifestations. A social whole may be logically necessary for human behavior described as the behavior of a part and yet still entail the manifestation of the part's behavior. If this is indeed correct, then although Gellner is quite correct in contending that human behavior described as the behavior of the appropriate part, cannot cause social whole behavior, it further shows that social wholes cannot causally influence human behavior insofar as social wholes are logically necessary for human behavior. This interpretation of Gellner's assertion that human behavior cannot causally influence the behavior of a whole is compatible with the preceding argument concerning social wholes as 'patterns for' behavior, i.e., a pattern for behavior is logically necessary for a description of human behavior as conforming to or transgressing the pattern.⁹

⁹ Mandelbaum, p.478-479.

Nevertheless, Gellner's contention concerning the illustrative role of human behavior is correct only insofar as the human behavior is a manifestation of the behavior of the social whole we are endeavoring to causally explain. Although Gellner may be correct in contending that human behavior is sufficient for the social whole's behavior, it does not imply that human behavior which is the manifestation of a social whole, cannot causally affect some other social whole.¹⁰ All that is needed in the causal explanation of a whole's behavior is that the human behavior not be a manifestation of that particular whole. There does not appear to be any logical problem in ascribing causal efficacy to human behavior which is logically related to a social whole which is other than the social whole whose behavior we are attempting to causally explain.

There is, besides the above, a different means of interpreting of Gellner's contention that human individuals cannot be employed to causally explain a whole's behavior. Human behavior may be illustrative rather than explanatory because human behavior is the only epistemological means of discerning the behavior of a social whole. Being the only means by which a whole's behavior is detected need not imply that human behavior is logically sufficient for such behavior. In the issue of empirical detectability human behavior may be empirically sufficient for the behavior of a whole. This interpretation of the illustrative role of human behavior, although no longer compatible with the interpretation of social wholes as 'patterns for' behavior, is compatible with Gellner's belief that social wholes may causally influence human behavior.

At first it might appear that if human behavior is empirically sufficient for the behavior of a whole, then human behavior, in being mentioned in the antecedent clause of a conditional stating an empirical relation, may be said to cause the behavior of the social whole. In a conditional relating causal connections that which is referred to in the antecedent is usually interpreted as the cause of that which is mentioned in the consequent. But of course, Gellner would correctly deny the equivocation of conditionals which relate an empirical relation with those which present a causal relation. Being empirically sufficient need not imply that human behavior is the cause of the behavior of a social whole. Conditionals which specify an empirical relation may be presenting a constant conjunction rather than a causal relation. If a conditional which expresses an empirical relation need not imply that a causal relation exists between that which is mentioned in the antecedent and that which is

¹⁰ Brown makes a similar point against Wisdom. Brown, p.303.

referred to in the consequent, then human behavior has not been shown to be the cause of the social whole's behavior. But if a conditional specifying an empirical relation may be stating a mere constant conjunction and the relation of human behavior to a social whole's behavior is appropriately expressed in such a conditional, then although human behavior has not been shown to be causally responsible for the social whole's behavior, the social whole's behavior has not been shown to be causally responsible for human individual behavior. Human behavior may indeed be merely an illustration of a social whole's behavior but being an illustration is not sufficient to show that a social whole may thereby be ascribed causal efficacy for human behavior. All that is shown by a conditional expressing a correlation rather than a causal relation is that the two entities are conjoined. But to say that two entities are conjoined is insufficient to show that either entity is causally responsible for the other. If, on the other hand, Gellner wished to imply that there is a causal relationship between wholes and human individuals as expressed in a conditional stating an empirical relation, then inasmuch as human behavior is referred to in the antecedent clause, human behavior may be causally responsible for social individual behavior.

III

There is nonetheless, something quite correct about Gellner's presentation which would be acceptable to virtually any Individualist. If we understand by "patterns", 'Patterns of behavior', social wholes, although no longer considered causally influential, may be interpreted as being prescription in nature. Inasmuch as social wholes are patterns for behavior, i.e., prescriptions as to what is to count as appropriate behavior, they serve to render intelligible the behavior of the human constituent.¹¹ This suggestion seems consonant with Gellner's contention that human individuals may *pace* Watkins, be the dependent variable. If social wholes are logically necessary for human behavior described as a part, then human behavior may be said to depend upon social wholes. This is not the sort of dependence envisioned by most Holists, e.g., Gellner, Lukes and Wisdom, for it is of a logical rather than an empirical nature. Nevertheless, in virtue of the impossibility of linguistic reduction, i.e., the reduction of all terms referring to social wholes to terms referring to human individuals without also employing or presup-

¹¹ Consider Winch's remarks concerning the necessity of referring to rules in the description of the Monk and the Antichrist. Winch, Chapter 2, section 3.

posing other social terms, it would appear that human individuals are the dependent variable regarding the intelligibility of behavior. Of course, it may be possible to describe human behavior independent of any specific whole but it is not similarly possible to describe human behavior independent of any whole.¹² Human behavior is always the behavior of a part although it need not be any particular part.

The relation of part and whole is equally harmonious with Gellner's belief concerning the illustrative role of human behavior. Human behavior in being describable only in terms which entail reference to social wholes, must be seen as an illustration or manifestation of that whole. Gellner's mistake, as was argued in Section II, consists in maintaining that human behavior in being illustrative is denied any explanatory role.¹³

If the above reconsideration is not spurious, the main difference between Gellner's version of Holism and Individualism rests with the fact that the causal efficacy of social wholes is accepted by the former yet denied by the latter.¹⁴ Gellner's mistake resides simply in

¹² Mandelbaum, p.478-479.

¹³ This argument may have a 'double edge' when employed by the Individualist. Agassi, for instance, wishes to deny that there is any conflict between Holism and Individualism once the social aims thesis, i.e., the thesis whereby social wholes possess independent aims, is eliminated. The elimination of the social aims thesis is accomplished once it is realized that an explanation of a social phenomenon in terms of the whole's aims is redundant given an explanation of the same phenomenon in terms of human aims. Yet if there is no conflict between Holism and Individualism, it is because the explanations proffered by each methodology do not explain the same phenomenon, e.g., human action and human aims for action. But this means that the two explanations are not redundant. If, on the other hand, a Holistic explanation is redundant given the Individualist's explanation, then insofar as both explanations account for the same phenomenon, they conflict. Consequently, although sufficient, the social aims thesis is not necessary for the methodological conflict. Agassi, p.244-251.

¹⁴ The Individualist's acceptance of both the illustrative and the explanatory roles of human behavior suggests a methodological compatibility between Popper and Winch. Winch has emphasized explanations of human behavior which refer to social wholes, i.e., prescriptive not causal explanations. Winch, Chapter 2, section 2, 4; Chapter 3, section 2, 6, 7. Popper, on the other hand, has emphasized the causal influence exerted by human individuals upon social wholes, causal; not prescriptive explanations. This is not to imply that Popper's program fails to account for the notion of social explanation proffered by Winch. Popper's notion of institutional analysis and explanation in terms of the second sense of "whole" appear to sufficiently cover Winch's presentation. Popper, p.76, 149.

inferring from the difference between wholes and generalities that wholes, as patterns, which may be reacted to, may be causally responsible for social phenomena. Gellner's version of Holism and Individualism may be construed as consonant once the thesis of causal efficacy with regard to social wholes is relinquished and replaced with an interpretation of social wholes as prescriptive agents.

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