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Social laws should be conceived as a special case of mechanisms

A reply to Daniel Little

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***Social laws should be conceived as a special case of mechanisms:
A reply to Daniel Little***
Johannes Persson, Lund University

I am grateful to Daniel Little for his insightful reply to my recent article in *Social Epistemology* (2012, 105-114) about what appears to be a flaw in Jon Elster's conception of mechanisms. I agree with much of what Little says, but want to amplify a different underlying problem with Elster's conception (fourth point below) than Little suggests in his reply (third point below). This underlying problem connects nicely with a passage in Little's reply, which he thinks unconnected with the point on which I focus.

First, I briefly state Elster's position.

Elster roots his perspective in a traditional view of explanation. A traditional view holds that a perfect covering law explanation is the best kind of explanation. The problem, as Elster sees it, is that we know of few such explanations in the social sciences. To bolster our explanatory resources, Elster introduces mechanistic explanations. Elster partly frames these mechanisms in terms of epistemic uncertainty. For instance, Elsterian mechanisms "are triggered under generally unknown conditions" (Elster 2007, 36). Elsterian mechanisms, then, depend on current epistemic conditions. Some day we may come to know the triggering conditions, thus we will no longer have an Elsterian mechanism. In Elster's view this outcome does not matter since we now have something even better — a covering law explanation — to replace mechanistic explanations.

For the purposes of this reply, I will assume I offer a correct interpretation of Elster.

Second, I want to formulate the paradox Elster's position generates.

I argue (2012) that Elster's view does not fit one important kind of scientific development. We can come to know the triggering conditions of local mechanisms without coming to know any covering laws. In those circumstances, Elster's conception of mechanism leads to the paradox that while we know more relevant causal truths than before — since we neither have the mechanism nor the law — these truths explain less. In Elster's words we would (quite surprisingly) be thrown "back on mere description and narrative" (Elster 1999, 1). The paradox is worrying as a logical possibility, but I think that scientific development often takes this path — developing an understanding of a particular mechanism before claiming that that mechanism is widely distributed (Persson 2005).

Third, I want to agree with Daniel Little's claim that Elster's epistemic conception of mechanisms generates this paradox.

Little's response (2012) to me in the *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* locates an underlying problem with Elster's position. He claims that Elster's epistemic conception of mechanism generates the paradox: "I think it reveals an important

underlying issue: the importance of treating causal mechanisms realistically rather than epistemically” (2012, 1) and “Or in other words: if Elster had taken a realist view of mechanisms, then his account would not be subject to the logical criticism that Persson raises against it. It is the relativization of ‘mechanism’ to ‘what we know’ that causes the problem” (2012, 5).

Moreover, a shift to realism about mechanisms (or “ontic mechanisms” as I prefer, Persson 2010) would align Elster’s conception not only with the contemporary literature on mechanisms but also with the way social scientists think of mechanisms — in line with what Little (2012) argues.

I fully agree with Little on these points, and I have little to add to the way he thinks that Elster’s position should be reformulated.

However, we are both attracted to realism about mechanisms for independent reasons. Little (1991) develops such a position in one of my favourite books, *Varieties of Social Explanation: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Social Science*. I have struggled with ontic accounts of mechanisms as well (Persson 1997 and 2005). Given our positions, we both risk a bias with regard to the remedies we suggest to remove the paradox.

Fourth, I want to propose, then, another underlying problem with Elster’s view.

One reason why I construct the argument against Elster (2012) without assuming a realist position is that I want to highlight a partly different underlying problem and to suggest another kind of remedy in addition to the kind Little proposes. The major problem with Elster’s conception of mechanism, I think, is that it cannot guard itself against the risk that there is a gap between mechanisms and covering laws. The paradox builds on the possibility of such a gap; we can add causal truths to a mechanism in order to disqualify it as a mechanism without adding so much that we end up with a causal law. Interestingly, this problem does not depend on an epistemic conception of mechanisms. A similar problem might arise in connection with ontic mechanisms as well.

The identification of this underlying problem is not in disagreement with Little’s remedy. A shift to ontic mechanisms from Elsterian mechanisms effectively eliminates this underlying problem as well. In Elster’s case, the fact that mechanisms depend on our epistemic condition gives rise to the existence of the gap between mechanisms and laws.

However, understanding the underlying problem with Elster’s conception, in the way I propose, makes other remedies possible. In particular, conceiving of causal laws as (generated in) a special case of mechanistic situation — a situation where the outcomes and triggering conditions are not indeterminate, for instance — would simply eliminate the paradox. And it does so whether or not an ontic conception of mechanisms is adopted.

Making this adjustment has consequences for the way we understand mechanistic explanation. For example, Elster could adjust his conception of mechanisms in the way I

describe and still hold the view that covering-law explanation is the best kind of explanation we can have. But he would have to reconsider the idea that mechanistic explanation is preliminary or second best. It would simply not be right to say: “Mechanisms are good only because they enable us to explain when generalisations break down. They aren’t desirable in themselves, only *faute de mieux*.” (Elster 1998, 49)

Little (2012) concludes by claiming that “social-mechanism explanations are the very best explanations we can hope for or should expect.” Making social law-explanations a special case of mechanistic explanation makes part of that claim necessary without falsifying or trivializing Little’s insight — an insight Elster (1998, 49) in fact shares — that the covering law explanation ideal is sometimes the enemy of the good.

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