

Pseudo-Science and Historical Understanding

06/19/2018 • Ludwig von Mises

In the English language, the word “science” is usually applied only to the natural sciences. There is no doubt that there are fundamental differences between the natural sciences and the science of human action, sometimes called social science or history. Among these fundamental differences is the way in which knowledge is acquired.

In the natural sciences knowledge comes from experiment; a fact is something experimentally established. Natural scientists, in contrast to students of human action, are in a position of being able to control changes. They can isolate the various factors involved, as in a laboratory experiment, and observe changes when one factor is changed. The theory of a natural science must conform to these experiments—they must never contradict such an established fact. Should they contradict such a fact, a new explanation must be sought. In the field of human action, we are never in a position of being able to control experiments. We can never talk of facts in the field of social sciences in the same sense in which we refer to facts in the natural sciences. Experience in the field of human action is complicated, produced by the cooperation of various factors, all effecting change.

In the field of nature we have no knowledge of final causes. We do not know the ends for which some “power” is striving. Some persons have attempted to explain the universe as if it had been intended for the use of man. But questions can then be raised: What is the value to man of flies, for instance, or of germs? In the natural sciences we know nothing but experience. We are familiar with certain phenomena and on the basis of experiments a science of mechanics has been developed. But we do not know what electricity is. We don’t know why things happen the way they do; we don’t ask. And if we do ask, we don’t receive an answer. To say we know the answer implies that we have ideas of “God.” To assert that we can find the reason implies that we have certain “God-like” characteristics.

There is always a point beyond which the human mind can go—a realm into which inquiry brings no more information. Through the years this frontier has been pushed farther and farther back. Natural forces have been traced back beyond what was formerly considered “ultimate” human knowledge. But human knowledge must *always* stop at some “ultimate given.” The French physiologist Claude Bernard [1813–1878] said in his book on experimental science that life itself is something “ultimately given”; biology can only establish the fact that there is such a phenomenon as life, but it can say nothing more about it.

The situation is different in the field of history or of human action. There we can trace our

knowledge back to something behind the action; we can trace it back to the motive. Human actions imply that men are aiming at definite goals. The "ultimate given" in the field of human action is the point at which an individual or a group of individuals, inspired by definite judgments of value and by definite ideas as to the procedures to be applied to attain a chosen end, acted. This "ultimate given" is *individuality*.

Being human we know something about human evaluations, doctrines, and theories concerning the methods used to reach these ends. We know there is some purpose behind the various moves of individuals. We know there is conscious action on the part of each person. We know there is a sense, a reason. We can establish that there are definite judgments of value, definite ends aimed at, and definite means applied in the attempt to gain these ends. For example a stranger, dropped suddenly into a primitive tribe, although ignorant of the language, can nevertheless interpret the actions of the people about him to some extent, the ends toward which they are working, and the means used to attain the ends. Through logic he interprets their running around building fires and putting objects in kettles as preparing food for dinner.

Dealing with judgments of value and methods is not peculiar to the science of human action. The logic of the scientist, the brainwork, is no different from the logic practiced by everybody in his daily life. The tools are the same. The aim is not peculiar to social scientists. Even a child crying and screaming has a motive and is acting to get something he wants. Businessmen also act to get things they want. They understand the science of human action and in dealing with their fellowmen they act on that understanding every day, especially in planning for the future.

This epistemological interpretation of the experience of understanding is not the invention of a new method. It is only the discovery of knowledge everybody has been using since time began.

Economist Philip H. Wicksteed [1844–1927], who published *The Common Sense of Political Economy*, chose for his motto a quotation from Goethe: *Ein jeder lebt's, nicht vielen ist's bekannt*. ("We are all doing it; very few of us understand what we are doing.")

According to the French philosopher Henri Bergson [1859–1941], understanding, *l'intelligence sympathique*, is the basis of the historical sciences. The historian collects his materials to assist his interpretation just as a policeman seeks the facts to enable him to reach a decision in court. The historian, the judge, the entrepreneur, all begin work when they have collected as much information as possible.

Auguste Comte, who contributed nothing to the development of the natural sciences, described what he believed to be the task of all sciences: he said that to be able to forecast and to act it was necessary to know. The natural sciences give us definite methods for accomplishing this. With the

aid of the various branches of physics, chemistry, and so on, mechanics are able to design buildings and machines and to forecast the results of their operations. If a bridge collapses, it will be recognized that an error was made. In human action, no such definite error may be recognized, and this Comte considered a failing.

Auguste Comte considered history to be non-scientific and consequently valueless. In his mind, there was a certain hierarchy of the various sciences. According to him, scientific study began with the simplest science and progressed to the more complicated; the most complicated science was still to be developed. Comte said history was the raw material out of which this complicated study was to develop. This new study was to be a science of laws, equivalent to the laws of mechanics developed by scientists. He called this new science "sociology." His new word "sociology," has had enormous success; people in all parts of the world now study and write about sociology.

Comte knew very well that a general science of human action had been developed during the previous hundred years—the science of economics, political economy. But Comte didn't like its conclusions; he wasn't in a position to refute them, nor to refute the basic laws from which they were derived. So he ignored them. This hostility or ignorance was also displayed by the sociologists who followed Comte.

Comte had in mind the development of scientific laws. He blamed history for dealing only with individual instances, with events that happened in a definite period of history and in a specific geographical environment. History did not deal with things done by men in general, Comte said, but with things done by individuals. But sociologists have not done what Comte said they should; they have not developed general knowledge. What they have done is just what Comte considered worthless, they have dealt with individual events and not with generalities. For instance, a sociological report was published on "Leisure in Westchester." Sociologists have also studied juvenile delinquency, methods of punishment, forms of property, and so on. They have written an enormous amount of material about the customs of primitive people. True, this literature does not deal with kings or wars; it deals principally with the "common man." But still it doesn't deal with scientific laws; it deals with historical facts, with historical investigations of what happened at one spot at a certain time. Such sociological studies are valuable, however, precisely *because* they deal with historical investigations, investigations of various aspects of human everyday life often neglected by other historians.

Comte's program is self-contradictory *because* no general laws can be determined from the study of history. Observations of history are always complex phenomena, interconnected in such a way that it is impossible to assign to specific causes, with unquestioned accuracy, a certain part of the final result. Therefore, the method of the historian has nothing in common with the methods of the

result. Therefore, the method of the historian has nothing in common with the method of the natural scientist.

The program of Auguste Comte to develop scientific laws from history has never been realized. So-called "sociology" is either history or psychology. By psychology I do not mean the natural sciences of perception. I mean the literary psychology described by the philosopher George Santayana [1863–1952] as the science of the understanding of historical facts, human evaluations dealing with human strivings.

Max Weber [1864–1920] called himself a sociologist, but he was a great historian. His book *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie* (Sociology of the Great Religions) deals in the first part, "The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism," with the origin of capitalism. He attributed the development of capitalism to Calvinism and he wrote very interestingly about it. But whether his theory can be logically supported is another question.

One essay on "the town"—which has not been translated into English¹—aimed at treating the city or town as such, at trying to give ideas about the town in general. He was very explicit in one regard, however, namely in maintaining that this approach was more valuable than dealing with the history of one town at a specific time. As a matter of fact, the situation may be the very opposite; it may be that the more general historical information is, the less material of value it contains.

With respect to the future, we must form certain opinions about the understanding of future events. The statesman, the entrepreneur, and, to a certain extent, everyone is in the same position. Each of us must deal with uncertain future conditions that cannot be anticipated. The statesman, the politician, the entrepreneur, and so on, are, so to speak, "historians of the future."

There exist in nature constant quantitative relationships—specific weights, and so on, which may be established in the laboratory. Thus we are in a position to measure and assign quantities of magnitudes to various physical objects. With the advance of the natural sciences, their study has become more and more quantitative—viz., the development of quantitative from qualitative chemistry. As Comte said, "Science is measurement."

In the field of human action, however, especially in the field of economics, there are no such constant relationships between magnitudes. Opinions to the contrary have been maintained, however, and even today many people fail to see that accurate quantitative explanations in the field of economics are impossible. In the field of human action, we can make explanations only with specific reference to individual cases.

Take the French Revolution, for instance. Historians search for explanations of the factors which

brought it about. Many factors cooperated. They assign values to each factor—the financial situation, the queen, her influence on the weak king, and so on. All may be suggested as contributing. Through the use of mental tools, historians attempt to understand the several factors and to assign to each a definite relevance. But how much each of the various factors influenced the outcome cannot be answered precisely.

In the natural sciences, the establishment of experimental facts does not depend on the judgment of individuals. Nor on the idiosyncrasies, or individuality, of the specific scientist. A judgment in the field of human action is colored by the personality of the man doing the understanding and offering the explanation. I do not speak of biased persons, nor of those who are politically partial, nor of persons who attempt to falsify facts. I refer only to those who are personally sincere. I do not refer to differences due to developments in other sciences that affect historical facts. I do not refer to changes in knowledge which affect historical interpretations. Nor am I concerned with differences influencing men due to scientific, philosophical, or theological points of view. I am dealing only with how two historians, who agree in every other regard, may nevertheless have different opinions, for instance, as to the relevance of the factors which brought about the French Revolution. The same unanimity will not be attained in the field of human action as there will be, for instance, with respect to the atomic weight of a certain metal. And with regard to the understanding of the future operations of an entrepreneur or a politician, only later events will prove whether certain prognostications based on their evaluations were, or were not, correct.

There are two functions involved in understanding: to establish the values, the judgments of people, their aims, their goals; and to establish the methods which they use to attain their ends. The relevance of the various factors and the way in which they influence results can only be matters of value judgments. In a discussion of the Crusades, for instance, it would appear that the principal causes were religious. But there were other causes. For example, Venice profited by establishing her commercial supremacy. It is the historian's task to decide the relevance of the various factors involved in a course of events.

The historical school of economics wanted to apply to economics the same general rules that Comte aimed at in sociology. There were people who recommended substituting something else for history—a science of laws derived from experience in the same way physics acquires knowledge in the laboratory. It was also held that the historical method was the only method for dealing with problems in the field of human action.

In the late eighteenth century, some reformers wanted to revise the existing system of laws. They pointed to the lack of success and shortcomings of the existing system. They wanted government to substitute new codes for old laws. They recommended reforms in conformity with "natural law." The

idea developed that laws cannot be written, that they originate in the nature of individuals. This theory was personified by Britain's Edmund Burke [1729–1797], who took the side of the colonies and who later became a radical opponent of the French Revolution. In Germany, the Prussian jurist Friedrich Karl von Savigny [1779–1861] was the advocate of this mode of thinking. With reference to the soul of the people, this group of reactionaries agreed with the school of Burke. This program was executed to some extent, and sometimes very well, in many European countries—Prussia, France, Austria, and finally in 1900 in the German Reich. In time opposition developed to this desire to write new laws. Yet these groups were the forerunners of the present-day world.

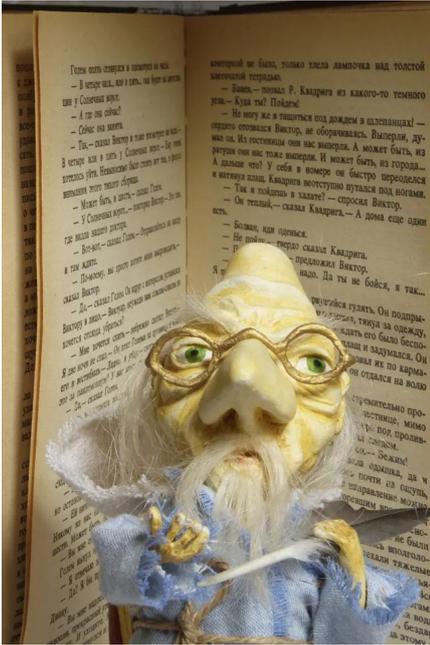
The school of the historical method says that if you want to study a problem, you must study its history. There are no general laws. Historical investigation is the study of the problem as it exists. One must first know the facts. To study free trade or protection, you can only study the history of its development. This is the opposite approach from that advocated by Comte.

All this is not to disparage history. To say that history is not theory, nor theory history, disparages neither history nor theory. It is only necessary to point out the difference. If a historian studies a problem he discovers that there are certain trends in history that prevailed in the past. But nothing can be said as to the future.

Men are individuals and, therefore, unpredictable. Mathematical laws of probability tell us nothing about any specific case. Nor does mass psychology tell us anything but that crowds are made up of individuals. They are not homogeneous masses. As a result of the study of masses of people and crowds it has been learned that a small change can bring about important and far-reaching results. For example, if someone yells "Fire!" in a crowded hall, the results are different from what they would have been in a small group. Also in a crowd, the prestige of the police and the threat of the penal code and of the penal courts are less powerful. But if we can't deal with individuals, we can't deal with masses.

If a historian establishes that a trend existed, it doesn't mean that the trend is good or bad. The establishment of a trend and its evaluation are two different things. Some historians have said that what is in agreement with the trends of evolution is "good," even moral. But the fact that there is an evolutionary trend today in the United States toward more divorces than formerly, or the fact that there is a trend toward increased literacy, for instance, doesn't make either trend "good," just because it is evolutionary.

1 [The first English edition, *The City*, was translated and edited by Don Martindale and Gertrud Neuwirth (Glencoe, Illinois, Free Press, 1958).—Ed.]



No content found

Meet the Author



Ludwig von Mises

Ludwig von Mises was the acknowledged leader of the Austrian school of economic thought, a prodigious originator in economic theory, and a prolific author. Mises's writings and lectures encompassed economic theory, history, epistemology, government, and political philosophy. His contributions to economic theory include important clarifications on the quantity theory of money, the theory of the trade cycle, the integration of monetary theory with economic theory in general, and a demonstration that socialism must fail because it cannot solve the problem of economic calculation. Mises was the first scholar to recognize that economics is part of a larger science in

...and that Mises was the first to recognize that economics is part of a larger science of human action, a science that he called *praxeology*.

Etatism, Protectionism, and the Demand for Lebensraum

08/13/2025 • Mises Daily • Ludwig von Mises

Having warned of the rise of national socialism and having fled the German army's march into Austria, Ludwig von Mises was in an excellent position to analyze Nazi economic doctrine.

Etatism, Protectionism, and the Demand for Lebensraum

08/13/2025 • Ludwig von Mises

Having warned of the rise of national socialism and having fled the German army's march into Austria, Ludwig von Mises was in an excellent position to analyze Nazi economic doctrine.

The Propaganda War Against Capitalism

07/15/2025 • Ludwig von Mises

The most popular method of deprecating capitalism is to make it responsible for every condition which is considered unsatisfactory.

[View Ludwig von Mises bio and works](#)
