

10 What Kind of Problem is the Hermeneutic Circle?*

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The hermeneutic circle serves as a standard argument for all those who raise a claim to the autonomy of the human sciences.¹ The proponents of an alternative methodology for the human sciences present the hermeneutic circle either as an ontological problem or as a specific methodological problem in the social sciences and the humanities. One of the most influential defenders of interpretivism in the English-speaking world, Charles Taylor, contends for example (1985: 18):

This is one way of trying to express what has been called the “hermeneutical circle.” What we are trying to establish is a certain reading of text or expressions, and what we appeal to as our grounds for this reading can only be other readings. The circle can also be put in terms of part-whole relations: we are trying to establish a reading for the whole text, and for this we appeal to readings of its partial expressions; and yet because we are dealing with meaning, with making sense, where expressions only make sense or not in relation to others, the readings of partial expressions depend on those of others, and ultimately of the whole.

Our understanding of a society is supposed to be circular in an analogous way: we can only understand, for example, some part of a political process only if we have some understanding of the whole, but we can only understand the whole, if we have already understood the part.² In this chapter I would like to check the soundness of this argument. I will

¹ In this chapter I draw from material in my *Naturalistic Hermeneutics* (2005). I would like to thank especially Pablo Abitbol, Dagfinn Føllesdal, Catherine Herfeld, and Diego Rios for their comments and criticisms. I am particularly thankful also to the participants of the Witten/Herdecke conference of June 2007 for their comments and suggestions. I would also like to thank the participants of the Joined Session of the Aristotelian Society and the Mind Association in July 2005 in Manchester for their comments on a preliminary version of this chapter.

² In Wolfgang Stegmüller’s words (1988: 103): “[T]he circle of understanding seems to be the rational core which remains after we eliminate all irrational factors from the thesis of the distinction or special position of the humanities *vis-à-vis* the natural sciences.”

* I dedicate this chapter to Petros Gemtos, Professor Emeritus of the Philosophy of the Social Sciences at the University of Athens on the occasion of his seventieth birthday.

start with listing and shortly sketching out three variations of the problem (sec. 1). I will then critically discuss these and appeal to alternative solutions (sec. 2) and I will close with a short conclusion (sec. 3).

1 The Problem of the Hermeneutic Circle

1.1 *Is the Hermeneutic Circle an Ontological Problem?*

The philologist Friedrich Ast was probably the first to draw attention to the circularity of interpretation. He pointed to “[t]he foundational law of all understanding and knowledge,” which is “to find the spirit of the whole through the individuals, and through the whole to grasp the individual” (Ast 1808: 178).³ There is a series of philosophers that present the hermeneutic circle as an ontological problem. The locus classicus that they refer to is Heidegger (1927/1962: 195): “This circle of understanding is not an orbit in which any random kind of knowledge may move; it is the expression of the existential *fore-structure* of Dasein itself. It is not to be reduced to the level of a vicious circle, or even of a circle which is merely tolerated.”⁴ The question arises about what is meant by that and whether in fact the hermeneutic circle is this kind of a problem (Albert 1994). According to the traditional view ontology concerns itself with what exists and ontological arguments are usually presented that the world must contain things of one kind or another as for example necessary beings, unextended things, simple things etc. Alternatively, Quine’s principle of ontological commitments, according to which to be is to be the value of a bound variable, does not tell us what things exist, but how to determine what things a theory claims to exist.⁵ In any case ontology deals with the issue of the existence of entities and the question at hand is whether the hermeneutic circle is an issue of ontology.

1.2 *Is the Hermeneutic Circle a Logical Problem?*

The circle of understanding can alternatively be thematized as a logical problem.⁶ It could be the case that the phenomenon of the hermeneutic

³ Schleiermacher characterizes as a hermeneutic principle the fact “that the same way that the whole is, of course, understood in reference to the individuals, so too, the individual can only be understood in reference to the whole.” (In a talk of 1829 now reprinted in Schleiermacher (1999: 329ff.))

⁴ See also the remark of Gadamer (1959/1988: 71): “Heidegger’s hermeneutical reflection has its point not so much in proving the existence of a circle as in showing its ontologically positive meaning.”

⁵ See e.g., Quine (1980).

⁶ The locus classicus to which the literature refers is Gadamer (1959/1988: 68): “The hermeneutical rule that we must understand the whole from the individual and the

circle has something to do with a logical circle. The relationship of the meaningful whole to its elements and vice versa could be of a logical nature. Two kinds of problems of a logical character could be relevant here. The hermeneutic circle could be concerned with *circular argumentation* in a deduction, which arises because in the process of proving something one falls back on a statement that one was supposed to prove. Or it could be related to a *circular definition*, which arises because the concept, which is still to be defined, has already unreflectively been used in the text beforehand. Is the nature of the problem a logical one?

1.3 *Is the Hermeneutic Circle an Empirical Problem?*

The hermeneutic circle is typically either viewed as an ontological or as a logical problem and is analyzed correspondingly. However, the question arises whether the phenomenon that the hermeneuticists are thinking of and characterize as the “circle of understanding” does present an empirical problem after all. With that, I mean that the movement of understanding from the whole to the part and back to the whole is a mental operation that could be analyzed with the tools of empirical science. In this case, the circle of understanding has nothing to do with ontology or with logic, but with the representation of knowledge in the mind of the interpreter which would present the following sort of empirical problem: how does the cognitive system of the interpreter perceive, classify, and understand written signs? Is this mental operation automatized, and what sort of cognitive mechanism is activated so that the meaning of part of a written expression is only available to the interpreter in dependence of the whole and vice versa?

2 **The Solution to the Problem**

If the hermeneutic circle were either an ontological or a logical problem, then this might indeed have very serious consequences. If the hermeneutic circle were an issue of ontology, this could force us to think differently with respect to ontology, the hermeneutic circle being practically ubiquitous when using language and dealing with texts. On the other hand, if the hermeneutic circle were a logical problem, then this would mean that the foundations of the human sciences were insecure and their scientific character was endangered. A lot seems to be at stake in both

individual from the whole stems from ancient rhetoric and was carried over by modern hermeneutics from the art of speaking to the art of understanding. There is in both cases a circular relationship.”

cases. In what follows I would like to show that the hermeneutic circle is neither a genuine ontological problem nor a logical problem and that consequently neither ontology nor the methodology of the human sciences face the danger that many philosophers and scholars in the social sciences and the humanities suggest they do.⁷ Rather, it will be shown that it is an empirical problem, which has long been studied using the tools of the empirical sciences.

2.1 *Why the Hermeneutic Circle is Not an Ontological Problem*

The philosophers that stress the ontological character of the hermeneutic circle are not concerned with a regional or special ontology, say of the social world. Their investigation is not about how social facts exist and what their properties are.⁸ Nor is their investigation about how social reality fits into our overall ontology i.e., how the existence of social facts relates to other things that exist. They instead claim that the hermeneutic circle is an expression of the fundamental structure of human beings. Besides, they claim that the inquiry of the fundamental structure of human beings has to take place within the framework of a special discipline, fundamental ontology, consisting of propositions of a special status, i.e. neither logical nor empirical. Heidegger stresses in his classic text, for example (1927/1962: 195): “The ‘circle’ in understanding belongs to the structure of meaning, and the latter phenomenon is rooted in the existential constitution of Dasein – that is, in the understanding which interprets. An entity for which, as Being-in-the-world, its Being is itself an issue, has, ontologically, a circular structure.” Claims such as this, being usually left unqualified, can function as poetic descriptions of human nature, but do not constitute *problems* and not even *arguments* that could be somehow reasonably dealt with.

2.2 *Why the Hermeneutic Circle is Not a Logical Problem*

Since there are hardly any genuine *arguments* suggesting that the hermeneutic circle is a problem of ontology, the question arises whether the hermeneutic circle has anything to do with logic instead. As Stegmüller noted in his classic article (1979/1988: 104ff.), logically the dispute about the hermeneutic circle runs up against a series of difficulties, which burden all hermeneutic literature: the

⁷ For textbook discussions of interpretivism see Little (1991, ch. 4), Kincaid (1996, ch. 6), and Manicas (2006, ch. 3).

⁸ For such an investigation see for example Searle (1995 and 2005).

pictorial-metaphorical language, the blurring of object- and meta-levels, the lack of clarity about the status of the key hermeneutical terms (above all the ambiguity of the word “understanding”), the merely apparent distance from psychologism, and finally, the complete lack of the analysis of examples.

However, what in any case applies is that the phenomenon of the hermeneutic circle has nothing to do with a logical circle, despite frequent insinuations of hermeneuticists to the contrary. The relationship of the meaningful whole to its elements and vice versa is not of a logical nature. It is thus not concerned with *circular argumentation* in a deduction, which arises because in the process of proving something one falls back on a statement that one was supposed to prove. Nor is it related to a *circular definition*, which arises because the concept, which is still to be defined, has already unreflectively been used in the text beforehand.

It is nevertheless possible that the hermeneutic circle, while not being a case of circular logic, still presents another type of logical problem. In a detailed explication of the concept, Stegmüller maintains that it constitutes a dilemma, or more concretely, one of six specific forms of dilemmas, depending on what is meant by the “hermeneutic circle” in a particular case.⁹ However, this transformation of the phenomenon into different forms of dilemmas i.e., into the types of difficulties that force the researcher to choose between two alternatives that are equally undesirable does not seem to be correct. In principle, Stegmüller’s analysis attempts to show that the hermeneutic circle is not in fact a *logical* problem, but that it still can be viewed as a *methodological* problem, which in some of its variations is by no means a narrow epistemological problem of the human sciences, but instead something that epitomises all disciplines. This applies, for example, to what is known as the dilemma of confirmation. It also applies to the dilemma in distinguishing between background knowledge and facts. In a careful analysis based on examples both from literature and astronomy, Stegmüller shows that, in testing the relative hypotheses, difficulties arise in precisely differentiating between background knowledge and facts. The testing of hypotheses requires a clear separation between hypothetical components in the observational data, on the one hand, and the theoretical background knowledge, on the other. As Stegmüller (1979/1988: 145ff.) convincingly shows, by no means does this problem just arise in the humanities. It can only be solved through critical discussions and the agreement of those in the discipline in question about what are to be considered facts and what is to be considered background knowledge in connection with the

⁹ For an even more detailed explication of the concept see Goettner (1973: 132 ff.).

specific hypothesis to be tested. Føllesdal, Walløe and Elster also defend the position that the hermeneutic circle is a methodological problem. They discuss a series of methodological problems that arise during the processes of understanding and claim that they all appear in the context of the justification of an interpretation.¹⁰

Now, I have no objections to this treatment *per se*, except that it certainly is not concerned with a logical problem in any narrow sense, but rather with a methodological problem. I would, however, deny that the problem of the relationship between the meaningful whole and its elements can be plausibly transformed in this way. One central view that I share with Stegmüller and with Føllesdal *et al.* is that, in the development of the meaning of texts, interpretative hypotheses are to be tested. In testing such interpretative hypotheses, the methodological problems or the dilemmas that these authors discuss will often, if not always, arise, especially the problem of distinguishing between facts and background knowledge. However, the problem of the relationship between the meaningful whole and its elements does not arise when *testing the interpretative hypotheses* but when *formulating them*. It is concerned with a special phenomenon that arises when one does not manage to understand linguistic expressions (or other signs) immediately i.e., more or less automatically. It is then necessary to set up interpretative hypotheses, and it is in doing this that one runs up against the problem of the meaningful whole and its elements. I will subsequently deal with what this activity more concretely looks like and how it is to be explained.

In summary, it can be asserted that the way that the hermeneutic circle is presented by representatives of philosophical hermeneutics does not suggest a methodological dilemma that can be solved by means of a decision or in any other way. Rather, the inevitability of the hermeneutic situation is pointed out and a “circle” is spoken of in order to somehow dramatize the issue. Stegmüller and Føllesdal *et al.* deny the hopelessness of escaping this problem, and with the help of methodological considerations, show that there are rational ways to come to grips with this issue after all. I would like to admit this hopelessness, but to play it down by showing that the hermeneutic situation is an empirical phenomenon.

¹⁰ See Føllesdal *et al.* (1996: 116ff.). They work out four variations of it: the whole and part circle, the subject–object circle, the Hypothetico Deductive Method circle and the question–answer circle. Martin (1994: 265ff.) also tries to “show that there is a problem analogous to the hermeneutic circle in the natural sciences but that has not prevented natural scientists from objectively testing their theories.”

2.3 *Why the Hermeneutic Circle Is an Empirical Phenomenon*

“A person who is trying to understand a text is always projecting. He projects a meaning for the text as a whole as soon as some initial meaning emerges in the text. Again, the initial meaning emerges only because he is reading the text with particular expectations in regard to a certain meaning. Working out this fore-projection, which is constantly revised in terms of what emerges as he penetrates into the meaning, is understanding what is there” (Gadamer 1960/2003: 267). This is how Gadamer, the most influential representative of philosophical hermeneutics, sketches out the process of understanding a text as a series of “hermeneutic circles.” The reader or the interpreter reads a text with preconceived expectations (preconceived opinions or prejudices), and in his work, he makes revisions. The understanding of the text, however, remains “permanently determined by the anticipatory movement of fore-understanding” (Gadamer 1960/2003: 293). When this activity has occurred, when understanding has already taken place, the circle of whole and parts is “not dissolved in perfect understanding,” if you will, “but, on the contrary, is most fully realized” (*ibid.*). In this classic exposition¹¹ of the hermeneutic circle, it seems clear to me – in contrast to the view of most hermeneutic philosophers – that the phenomenon being described is empirical.¹²

What is, more specifically, the case? What kind of cognitive activity is linguistic understanding? Given that this cognitive activity is improvable with practice, one can become faster at it and can become more precise, it is clear that it is a skill. In general, acquiring skills is much different than learning facts.¹³ For example, a violinist learns to play pieces faster and

¹¹ Classic insofar as the present discussion continually refers to this passage. See e.g., Reale (2000: 96f.).

¹² It is characteristic of the prevailing confusion that, in diverse loci, Gadamer himself says different or contradictory things about the hermeneutic circle. So, he says in *Truth and Method* (1960/2003) on p. 293: “Thus the circle of understanding is not a “methodological” circle, but describes an element of the *ontological structure of understanding*” [my emphasis]. But then, in a footnote, Gadamer reacts to the above mentioned criticism of Stegmüller (p. 266): “The objection raised from a logical point of view against talk of the ‘hermeneutic circle’ fails to recognize that this concept makes no claim to scientific proof, but presents a *logical metaphor*, known to rhetoric ever since Schleiermacher” [my emphasis]. Thus, it appears, it is supposed to be both an “element of the ontological structure of understanding” and a “logical metaphor,” whereby it is completely unclear what is meant by a “logical metaphor.”

¹³ Neurological studies with patients suffering from amnesia show that the difference between acquiring skills and learning facts is honored by the nervous system. In a classic study, for example, Cohen and Squire report on patients who were capable of acquiring a “mirror-reading skill,” although they had a memory neither of the words that they read nor even of being confronted with the task. Their amnesia in relation to the specific words and the fact that they dealt with them in a laboratory experiment did not hinder the learning or exercising of a skill i.e., the reading of words that were presented in mirror images. See Cohen and Squire (1980).

to hold tones by practicing. A small child can only learn to brush his or her teeth by practice, etc. The investigation of learning processes that lead to the acquisition of these types of skills has long been an established branch of psychological research.

In our context it is significant that in acquiring skills one will not only become faster and more precise, but that it will also continue to be easier to exercise them, and in fact the skill will become automatic.¹⁴ In everyday life an enormous number of skills are carried out in this automatized fashion. That means that they become routines, and no cognitive resources in the form of attention are required in carrying them out. The automatization of the skills implies that they are carried out without conscious effort. In the case of understanding language, which is of interest here, the stroop effect is characteristic, named after its discoverer, Ridley Stroop (1935): If people are confronted with the names of colors that are printed in other colors – “blue” printed in red, “green” printed in black, etc., and they are to name the colors in which the words are printed, then they tend to read the words, because reading is an automatized skill. We tend to pronounce the words unconsciously because we have practiced doing so for years.¹⁵

This automatization of learned skills is a general phenomenon, which has already been empirically investigated and explained (although there is still no consensus about the neurophysiological processes that underlie it). It is known, for example, that in the middle phase of a game, a chess master needs five to ten seconds in order to propose a good move, which is often objectively the best move (Simon 1979: 386ff.). As Simon notes when referring to this explanation (1983: 26):

[I]t does not go deeper than the explanation of your ability, in a matter of seconds, to recognize one of your friends whom you meet on the path tomorrow as you are going to class. Unless you are very deep in thought as you walk, the recognition will be immediate and reliable. Now in any field in which we have gained considerable experience, we have acquired a large number of “friends” – a large number of stimuli that we can recognize immediately. [...] We can do this not only with faces, but with words in our native language. Almost every college-educated person can discriminate among, and recall the meanings of, fifty to a hundred thousand different words. Somehow, over the years, we have all spent many hundreds of hours looking at words, and we have made friends with fifty or a hundred thousand of them. Every professional entomologist has a comparable ability to discriminate among the insects he sees,

¹⁴ See on this Baron (1994).

¹⁵ It is possible to experience the same difficulty in a similar way. Try to give the number of symbols in each group of symbols in the following list. For example, when you see YYY, answer with three, when you see 5555 answer with four, etc.:

YYY YY 5555 33 444 22 222 3333 44444 3 11 222.

and every botanist among the plants. In any field of expertise, possession of an elaborate discrimination net that permits recognition of any one of tens of thousands of different objects or situations is one of the basic tools of the expert and the principal source of his intuitions.

It thus appears that texts are not only read against the background of the reader's presumptions and prejudices, but also – and more generally – against the background of their own experience with the material. Because the corresponding skill has become routinized, the text is normally understood automatically, and not consciously. Thereby it is of course to be emphasized that, because it is a complex skill, all levels play a role in understanding language: the phonologic, the semantic, the syntactic, and the pragmatic levels. One gains experience in all of these levels over the course of time, so that sounds, words, sentences, and entire texts are automatically classified and therefore language processing under standard conditions takes place effortlessly.

If a difficulty arises in the language comprehension process and if one does not manage to understand linguistic expressions immediately, then cognitive resources for solving the problem are activated. We focus our attention in order to consciously interpret an expression: an interpretative hypothesis is consciously generated. In psycholinguistics this conscious comprehension of language is often modeled as an interactive process. The relevant levels of information processing, the phonologic, the semantic, the syntactic, and the pragmatic, are not sequentially activated i.e., one after another. Rather, the information is processed in all of these levels in parallel and simultaneously. Our language comprehension system keeps all the information available so that it is possible to have recourse to all of the information categories at any time.¹⁶

The discourse on the hermeneutic circle does nothing more than imprecisely depict the search process that is activated if the interpreter of a linguistic expression does not understand something immediately. Nowadays psycholinguistics does not only offer more precise descriptions of the phenomenon, it also provides explanations of the underlying search processes and mechanisms of language comprehension. We know, for example, that language recognition results from the classification of patterns and that a considerable amount of data is necessary for this classification. The explanations that are offered from psycholinguistics are formulated in a testable form and have been tested in laboratory experiments; but nobody talks about hermeneutic circles in that case.¹⁷

¹⁶ This interactive approach of the language processing system has been experimentally studied, especially by Danks, Bohn, and Fears (1983).

¹⁷ For an informative overview of linguistic understanding, with a further bibliography see Anderson (2005, ch. 12).

Furthermore, with respect to the completion of understanding in accord with the completion of the hermeneutic circle, I would like to point to the cognitive mechanism that lies at the basis of every “aha” experience. The “aha” experiences of diverse intensity, which an interpreter has when the process of comprehension is completed, are neither irrational nor *a priori*. The main argument why a cognitive mechanism is at work on the phenomenon at hand is the fact that only people with the appropriate knowledge have “aha” experiences (Simon 1986: 244f.). Without recognition based on previous experience, the process of comprehending new linguistic expressions cannot take place, and while performing this activity our intuition exploits the knowledge that has been gained through past searches.

Finally, it is important in this context to emphasize that in the perceptual process that underlies the overall mental process of understanding texts, first, the written expression is encoded, before, at a second stage, the syntactic and semantic analysis known as *parsing* can follow. Parsing is the process by which the words in the expression are transformed into a mental representation with the combined meaning of the words. During this procedure, the meaning of a sentence is processed phrase by phrase, and the exact formulation of the phrases is only accessed while processing its meaning (Anderson 2005: 391). People integrate both semantic and syntactic cues in order to achieve an understanding of a statement or a text. As Steven Pinker (1994: 227) has noted: “Understanding, then, requires integrating the fragments gleaned from a sentence into a vast mental database. For that to work, speakers cannot just toss one fact after another into a listener’s head. Knowledge is not like a list of facts in a trivial column but is organized into a complex network. When a series of facts comes in succession, as in a dialogue or text, the language must be structured so that the listener can place each fact into an existing framework.”

It thus appears that in understanding, the phenomenon called “hermeneutic circle” is at work. As soon as a word occurs, people attempt to extract as much meaning as possible out of it: they do not wait until a sentence is completed to decide on how to interpret a word – a finding brought to light by the experiments of Just and Carpenter, among others.¹⁸ If a sentence contains unfamiliar words, which cannot

¹⁸ Just and Carpenter studied the movement of the eyes during the reading of a sentence, and since in reading a sentence subjects typically fixate on almost every word, they found out that the time that the subjects spend fixating on a word is proportional to the amount of information the respective word contains. If a sentence contains a relatively unfamiliar word, the eye movement pauses longer at this word. There are also longer pauses at the end of the phrase in which the unfamiliar word is found. See Just and Carpenter (1980).

be understood immediately, then one spends additional time at the end of the phrase or the sentence to integrate the meaning. Thus the problem of the relationship between the meaningful whole and its constitutive elements, and vice versa, does not arise when testing interpretative hypotheses, but when generating them. It refers to a phenomenon that arises when it is not possible to understand linguistic expressions immediately i.e., more or less automatically. This problem thus appears to arise *both for words and sentences, and for entire texts*. To resolve it, cognitive resources are activated. We focus our attention to consciously interpret an expression, and interpretive hypotheses are consciously generated.

It should be sufficiently obvious by now, but I would like to state it also explicitly: For my own general argument to hold, it is not necessary to accept that, for example, the mechanism of parsing constitutes the correct explanation of the phenomenon or that the relevant levels of information processing are activated simultaneously and not sequentially. What is important is only that those claims are empirical claims – *even if they are wrong, they are still empirical*.

3 Conclusion

Concluding, it is possible to assert that until now it has not been possible to show that the hermeneutic circle constitutes an ontological or a logical problem. Rather, everything indicates that it describes an empirical phenomenon, which can be studied within the framework of psycholinguistics and other empirical disciplines. It is thus not capable of serving as a legitimating argument for the separation between the natural and the human sciences and therefore cannot lend any support to the claim for autonomy of the social sciences and the humanities.

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- and on the So-called 'Theory-Ladeness' of Observations." In J.M. Connolly and T. Keutner (eds.) *Hermeneutics versus Science? Three German Views*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, pp. 102–152. Originally published as "Walther von der Vogelweides Lied von der Traumliebe und Quasar 3C 273. Betrachtungen zum sogenannten Zirkel des Verstehens und zur sogenannten Theorienbeladenheit der Beobachtungen." In *Rationale Rekonstruktion von Wissenschaft und ihrem Wandel*. Stuttgart: Reclam 1979, pp. 27–86.
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10 – Comment Going in Circles

David-Hillel Ruben

If there is such a thing as the hermeneutic circle, it is surely at least a circle. In this usage, however, “circle” is a mere metaphor. What is a circle in the sense required by the idea of a hermeneutic circle? The purpose of this comment is to develop a typology for circles in the relevant sense, and thereby show how the idea of a hermeneutic might be shown to be intelligible and what the requirements would be for there to be such a thing. I also address the issue of the need for a hermeneutic circle at all, of any kind, albeit briefly, at the end of the comment.

The hermeneutic circle must have something to do with a characteristic of the relationship between the items that are joined by the circle. So there must be (1) the items so related, and (2) the relations between them. By all accounts, the hermeneutic circle says something about explanation or understanding. So the relation of (2) must be the relation of explaining.

Is the relation in which we are interested really the explaining relation? There is an awful lot of talk in Chrys Mantzavinos’s chapter, and in the literature he cites, about understanding. I know of no plausible distinction between understanding and explanation, in advance of a thesis about the irreducible differences between knowledge in, or the methodology of, the natural and social sciences. We cannot start by assuming that understanding and explanation are different ideas. I will therefore use them as interchangeable, until or unless we find a convincing reason to introduce the distinction between them.

To an earlier draft of this comment, Mantzavinos replied that unlike me, he starts by taking the idea of the difference between understanding and explanation “seriously.” If we focused on understanding rather than explanation, and agreed that they were distinct, I am not sure in any case that it would make any difference to the results of this comment. We could say that something was understandable by virtue of another thing’s being understandable. We might take the relation of something’s making a second thing understandable as a primitive relation, or we might try and give it some account different from the account given to

the idea of explanation. But in either case, it seems to me that all the problems I raise here regarding explanation could be re-raised using the alternative terminology of understanding and the relationship between one item's being understandable and another's being understandable.

Claims about circles, or their near relations, wholes, are not uncommon in philosophy, but different claims about circles might not all be using the idea of a circle in the same way. One might start by trying to distinguish between circles of particulars and circles of concepts, and finally between them and "hybrid" circles which have both.

A circle purely of particulars is a circle embracing a definite number of particulars. Without some such restriction, there would be an endless series of particulars rather than a circle of them. There are of course an infinite number of points on a circle. But the circles we are considering are circles that join various "discrete" items (whether propositions, texts, facts, people, concepts, or whatever). It is to these items that the limit restriction applies.

Perhaps there are particulars $a, e, i, \dots, u,$ and $y,$ and some relation R such that a has R to $e,$ e has R to \dots u has R to $y,$ and y has R to $a.$ In this case, the particulars form a circle purely of particulars, and the same particular "reappears" as one "travels" around the circle repeatedly. (The ideas of travelling and repetition are to be understood metaphorically, since the relata might not even be ones with spatio-temporal location.)

A simple example of a circle purely of particulars might be the example of a so-called love triangle. Arnold might love Betty and Betty might love Charles and Charles might love Arnold, who loves Betty, who loves... etc. Circles purely of particulars such that the particulars on them were temporally dated items like events can be problematic, depending on the nature of the relation $R.$ Arnold and all his mates above have temporal location but, in combination with the loving relation, this presents no problem. But where " R " stands for some other relation, this might not be so. For example, if the relation in question were the causal relation and if all causes must occur before their effects, such a circle of token events would require a particular to happen at two distinct times, which is an absurdity. So if causes must occur before their effects and if no particular can occur wholly at two distinct times, then there can be no such circle purely of particulars as one in which event e causes i and i causes o and o causes $e.$ Event e cannot occur both before and after $i.$

The connection between holism and circularity is complicated.¹ Does Davidson's "holism of the mental" involve the idea of a circle? "...

¹ Charles Taylor says: "... The circle can also be put in terms of part-whole relations: we are trying to establish a reading for the whole text, and for this we appeal to the readings

we cannot intelligibly attribute any propositional attitude to an agent except within the framework of a viable theory of his beliefs, desires, intentions, and decisions” (Davidson 2001: 221f.). A minimalist interpretation of what this means seems to be that for the agent to have some propositional attitude, he must have other propositional attitudes; the existence of any one propositional attitude entails the existence of many others. But if that is true, each of the further entailed propositional attitudes will require still others. If there are a finite number of propositional attitudes that an agent holds at a time, and these are token states of an individual, this might suggest that some sort of circle is lurking in Davidson’s holism. The claim might be understood as asserting that there is a circle purely of particulars, where the relata are the individual propositional states of the agent. The claim is that if the agent has one

of its partial expressions; and yet because we are dealing with meaning, with making sense, where expressions only make sense or not in relations to others, the readings of partial expressions depend on those others, and ultimately of the whole.” The circle that Taylor speaks about here is a circle of a whole and its parts.

“Understanding a part depends on understanding the whole” has a certain ambiguity about it. Let “S” stand for the totality of social facts. It could be that what we have already said exhausts the content of this claim. S may have gained its rightful place in the explanatory circle (if there were one) just in case every part of S figures in the circle at some point or other. On this view, the whole, S itself, would not figure in any one point on the circle. Only every one of its parts would be on the circle somewhere, if there were such a circular chain.

There is another view, one which might be attributed to Hegel and which seems to be what Taylor has in mind above, that to understand any one thing (say, a part of a text), one must first understand not just each part *seriatim*, but the totality of them, S, say the whole text: “Das Ganze is...not formed by composition, but by development out of its Concept. The whole is prior to its parts, and the parts can only be understood in terms of the whole. Each part serves the purpose of the whole” (Inwood 1992: 309). Some of Mantzavinos’s quotes seem to say much the same: quoting Friedrich Ast, “... to find the spirit of the whole through the individuals, and through the whole to grasp the individuals.” Indeed, the problem that Mantzavinos sets himself as the major issue in the chapter, and to which he thinks turns out to be an empirical question, concerns “... the movement of understanding from the whole to the part and back to the whole” (p. 301).

Before I could decide whether the problem was empirical, conceptual, or logical (the three alternatives Mantzavinos offers us), I should like to understand just what the problem is a bit better. Perhaps the best that can be made of this Hegel–Taylor–Ast view is in terms of a distinction between merely adequate and full explanation or understanding. If we switch now from texts to society, the view might be this: one might be able to merely adequately explain one social fact in terms of another, but such explanation as that provides lacks something, falls short in some way. A truly full explanation of any social fact can only be achieved after one has a merely adequate explanation of them all, as a whole, and this may bring one to revise in some way some of the earlier understandings one had offered previously. In light of an understanding of the whole (text or society), the explainer may readjust his understanding of some of the constituent parts. This view also seems to bear some affinities to Rawls’s method of reflexive equilibrium (Rawls 1999:18–19, 42–45). I am not sure that this way of representing the dialectic between whole and part – whether the meaning of texts or the explanation of society – is best expressed as a circle at all.

such propositional attitude, then there are many others he has, although which other attitudes there are may differ from agent to agent. Each agent will have his own circle of propositional attitudes that may not be quite like any other agent's circle.

In Davidson's holism of the mental, what is the relation that holds between the relata understood as an agent's token mental states? It certainly cannot be the causal relation, for the reason given above. The relation in the quote above seemed to be the relation of requiring the existence of, or some such. Davidson also says: "... we make sense of particular beliefs only as they cohere with other beliefs, with preferences, with intentions, hopes, fears, expectations, and the rest ... the content of a propositional attitude derives from its place in the pattern." The relation between the propositional attitudes in this last quote is a relation that fixes their content, whatever that might be. Finally, he says that "... the attribution of mental phenomena must be responsible to the background of reasons, beliefs, and intentions of the individual." Just what the idea of responsibility is that he employs here, and what relation Davidson thinks that involves, he never makes clear. But it certainly seems that the three quotes are not making exactly the same claim.

Clarification of the connection between wholes and circles requires careful analysis of the meaning of both a circle and a whole, in the relevant senses. If there are an infinite or an indefinitely large number of well-formed sentences in a language (considered as abstract objects, whether they had ever been uttered by anyone or not), one might believe that each sentence gains its sense from its connections with all the rest. Such a belief could be described as a belief about the holistic nature of meaning, although the idea of a circle of meaning would seem inappropriate. A "picture" of such a non-circular whole might be an infinitely long straight line drawn through an infinite number of nodes, each node representing a sentence, with additional curved lines connecting each sentence, each node, directly with all others to which it is not already directly connected on the straight line. The picture would be akin to a straight line with lots of humps, indeed an infinite number of such humps, but certainly not a picture of a circle. Without the restriction, the idea of a circle is lost. In a circle, something must return to its point of origin in some way or other. That return will not ever happen in the case of a line that has nodes on it which represent an infinite or indefinitely large number of things.

There can also be circles purely of concepts. Quine's claim, for example, that there is a circle of concepts, embracing synonymy, meaning, possibility, definition, semantic rules, and so on, is a claim about such a circle (Quine 1961). The Quinean thesis might be expressed

in this way: there exists a set of concepts, such that each can be explicated using some of the others, and no one of which can be explicated using concepts not in that set. The picture for such a circle might be of a circle with lots of straight lines inside the circle, joining each point on the circle's circumference directly with other points, including points distant from one another on the circumference itself. The curved and straight lines converging from many concepts to each concept on the circle (including the concepts next to it on the circumference) represent the concepts needed in the explication of the former.

The thought behind circles purely of concepts need not make use of the idea of a particular at all. Quine's claim can be set out using the explication relation and concepts. In a circle purely of concepts, there is a set containing a definite number of concepts and there is some relation R that relates one concept to another or to others in the set. His claim about these concepts is that there is, as it were, no way out of the circle.

But a third type of circle, the "hybrid" as I called it earlier, needs the idea of a particular as well as the idea of a concept. First, for any hybrid circle, there must of course be some relation, R , such that the items or nodes have that relationship to one another. In all hybrid circles that we will consider, there will be a definite number of concepts, F, G, H, J . I will distinguish two kinds of such hybrid circles. In the first kind, there will be a definite number of particulars as well as a definite number of concepts. In the second kind, there will be a definite number of concepts, but an unrestricted, inexhaustibly or indefinitely large, number of particulars, $a, e, i, o, u \dots$ Read "Fa," "Ge," etc., as the fact that a is or becomes F . It is true that one might even think of a fact as a particular, since the relata of relations are generally taken to be particulars, but I prefer to distinguish these hybrid circles from cases of purely particular circles, because of the inclusion of concepts in them but not in purely particular circles. Both concepts and particulars matter to the identity of facts, and that is why circles of singular facts can be thought of as circles with structured items or nodes, with both a particular and a concept playing a part in that structure.²

In the first sort of hybrid circle, for example, Fa has R to Ge , and Ge has R to Hi , and Hi has R to Mo , and Mo has R to Fa . In this first kind of hybrid circle, since there will be a definite number of particulars and of concepts, there will only be a definite number of combinations of particulars and concepts, in short, a definite number of facts. In the case in which the definite number of facts are about temporally locatable items, at some point, somewhere, some first fact will at one time have whatever

² For identity conditions for facts, see my *Explaining Explanation* (1990, ch. V).

the specified relation is to a second fact, and yet also some third fact will have that same relation to the first fact, but at a different time. This will place the particular, or the particular's having some concept true of it, which is what that first fact is about, at two different times. The above assumes that the particular or the concept's being true of the particular occurs at a time. The story will have to be made more complicated to cover cases of temporal duration or extension rather than occurrence at a time, but the lessons of the story will not thereby substantially change.

Whatever temporal problems there might be with some purely particular circles regarding double temporal location would carry over to some hybrid of this kind, if the facts are facts about temporally dated items, and depending of course on what relation R is. For example, if the causal relation related facts, rather than events, the remarks above about difficulties for a purely particular circle of events joined by the causal relation would apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to a hybrid circle of the first kind that was allegedly a circle of facts joined by that same relation.

However, in a more interesting, second kind of hybrid circle, the concepts will repeat, since there is only a definite number of them, but the particulars will not, there being an inexhaustible supply of the latter. (I do not say that there must be an infinitely large number; let "inexhaustible" or "indefinitely large" serve us here.) For example, the hybrid circle of the second kind might be as above but Mo will have R to Fu (NOT to Fa), where u is not identical to a, and then Fu have R to Gw (NOT to Ge), where w is not identical to e, and so on. It is the latter, second sort of hybrid circle on which I will focus.

(Might there be hybrid circles with a finite number of particulars but an indefinitely large supply of concepts? It is difficult for me to see how there could be a science with an infinitely large conceptual repertoire, but I shall not address this possibility further.)

Think of each "journey" around the circle as a revolution of the circle. On each revolution of a hybrid circle of what I have called the more interesting, second kind, the same concepts constantly reappear but the particulars change on each circular revolution (or perhaps only change in relation to which concept is true of them). There are no restrictions on the number of particulars which a hybrid circle includes; the only restriction is that the number of concepts must be finite. The number of particulars is indefinitely large, or inexhaustible, so that no specific singular fact needs to appear more than once in the repeated circular revolutions.

If one wants to think about hybrid circles pictorially, perhaps the following would help. Hybrid circles of the first kind might be represented

by two interlocking circles: a circle of a definite number of particulars and a circle of a definite number of concepts. The circles interlock because the concepts are true of the particulars. Hybrid circles of the second kind might be represented by a straight line which is indefinitely long in at least one direction, and a single continuously-revolving circle above the line at all points. The indefinitely long straight line represents the particulars; the single continuously-revolving circle represents the definite number of concepts, at least one of which is true of each of the indefinitely many particulars. The picture is not quite right as described: some particular *o* might recur, once as an *F*, later as a *G*, and so on. In truth it is no singular fact that can appear more than once. If both concepts and particulars were finite, then some fact would eventually reappear; the indefinite largeness of the number of the particulars prevents any singular fact from ever recurring.

For cases in which the relation *R* is either not reflexive or not symmetrical, one might have thought that circles in general would saddle us with unwanted reflexivity and symmetry. Suppose that *R* is a transitive relation. (But is explanation or understanding transitive? Views about this differ.) If there is transitivity, then if there is a circle such that *aRb*, *bRc* and *cRa*, it follows both that *aRc* and *cRa* (and similarly for every pair of particulars). So *R* must be symmetrical. But using transitivity again, if *aRc* and *cRa*, it also follows that *aRa*. So *R* must be reflexive. Surely this cannot be right for explanation or understanding. It is contentious whether or not explanation is transitive but no one, I take it, thinks that explanation must be reflexive (but it might be non-reflexive rather than irreflexive) or that it must be symmetrical (surely it must be asymmetrical).

On purely particular circles, if *R* is transitive, these results would follow and this shows something deeply unwelcome about the idea of some alleged purely particular circles that employ transitive relations. (It would not disturb the participants in our love triangle, since the loving relation is, alas, not transitive.) However, on the second kind of hybrid we are considering, each singular fact making its appearance only once due to the inexhaustible supply of particulars, these will not be genuine issues for us. There can be no reflexivity or symmetry issues on the types of circles we are considering, even assuming the transitivity of explanation. No singular fact will explain itself or be explained by what it explains, since no singular fact ever reappears anyway (even if the particular involved in it does).

Let's return to our original question: what kind of circle might a hermeneutic circle be? If there is a hermeneutic circle, there are items on it which are joined by certain relations. The relationship is that of understanding or explanation: something explains a second thing, or

the second thing is understandable in the light of the first. But what are the items joined by this relation? Are they particulars or concepts or facts? What kind of circle would a hermeneutic circle be, if there were one: purely of particulars, purely of concepts, or hybrid?

First, let's consider what the items or nodes would be on a hermeneutic circle. Are texts or other linguistic items that for which we seek understanding or explanation? Charles Taylor says that it is "a certain reading of text or expressions" The end of Mantzavinos's chapter makes it clear that he is thinking of a hermeneutic circle in the understanding of a text ("words, and sentences, and for entire texts," p. 309). For those who wish to draw out the implications for the social sciences, he adds that the objects are, for example, "some part of the political process" (p. 299, bottom).

Now, it does seem to me to be important to decide which we are going to discuss. I do not think that whatever lessons we might learn about the understanding of texts necessarily carries over to the understanding of items such as parts of the political process. The analytic tradition of Mill, Hempel, and Popper, has always focused on the explanation of laws and singular events. "Understanding the meaning of a text" was never thought to be the sort of thing that non-hermeneutic philosophers were intending to analyse. In a well-known passage, Hempel says:

... to put forward the covering-law models of scientific explanation is not to deny that there are other contexts in which we speak of explanation, nor is it to assert that the corresponding uses of the word "explain" conform to one or another of our models. Obviously, these models are not intended to reflect the various senses of "explain" that are involved when we speak of explaining the rules of a contest, explaining the meaning of a cuneiform inscription or of a complex legal clause or of a passage in a symbolist poem, explaining how to bake Sacher torte or how to repair a bike ... Hence to deplore, as one critic does, the "hopelessness" of the deductive-nomological model on the ground that it does not fit the case of explaining or understanding the rules of Hanoverian succession is simply to miss the intent of the model. (Hempel 1970: 412–413)

I do not think that the analytic tradition concerned with explanation has ever had much to say about the issue of understanding or explaining a text or a passage in a text. One might feel: *tant pis* for the analytic tradition if that is so. But still, it is so.³

³ For what it is worth, I don't think there is a circle in understanding a text, in one obvious meaning of "understanding" at any rate. Take the understanding of a contemporary text rather than an ancient or historical one, for the same lessons ought to apply in either case. Suppose I read a contemporary novel. Don't I understand the whole novel by understanding each chapter and each chapter by understanding each page, and so on down to the basic units of meaning? So one understands the sentence if one understands

But happily we need not decide any of these issues here. For what we are interested in is a position in the philosophy of social science, not in the philosophy of language, or in the philosophy of literature. To revert to Mantzavinos's own example, understanding some part of the political process – say, understanding the voting system in western European countries – is a different matter from understanding a text. But “understanding the voting system” is surely an elliptical expression. Something is missing. But what is it to understand or explain the voting system? To put the point in a different way, the items that stand in the explaining relation in which we are interested are not substance-like items, particulars, such as “the voting system in western European countries.” So the alleged hermeneutic circle is not just a circle purely of particulars. What exactly are the items that explain and get explained, that provide understanding and get understood?

Well, in the case at hand, it could be a lot of different things: understanding what caused the voting system to be the way it is, what function it has within a society, why it is in danger of breaking down, how it is perceived by voters, what its overall significance in the society is, and so on. I do not think that just repeating the phrase solemnly, “understanding the voting system,” advances us. The question needs answering: understanding what about it? Its causes, its function, its meaning for the participants, its significance, its likely future, and so on, are some of the possibilities. In short, we might want any of a number of different and distinct facts about that voting system explained to us. Let's call facts of this kind, like the fact that the voting process in western European countries has certain causes, or that it performs certain functions in those societies, or that it has a certain point for its participants, “social facts.”

The social facts I will be considering will be singular facts about particular social events, states, processes, or whatever, having certain

the words in the sentence and the ways in which they are combined; understands the paragraph if one understands the sentences that make it up, and so on.

However, it may be that the sense of “understanding the meaning of” that interests those who find a hermeneutic circle thesis about texts illuminating is something stronger. Perhaps by “understanding the meaning of a text” they are referring to the text's real significance, its point, its real message, its interpretation in the sense that a literary critic might use that expression. To really understand a Brecht play, one has to understand not just the words, sentences, and acts that make it up, but the political context in which it is written, the kind of intervention it was trying to make in the political life of Germany in the period in which it was written, and so on. And once we do that, it may be that, even though we have already fully understood the semantic meaning of all the sentences in the play, we can see that they have significance and a point which we did not see until we understood the point, etc., of the whole play. But all of this, plausible though it might be, takes us far beyond the confined realms of understanding semantic meaning.

features or properties, or about non-social particulars having certain social properties.⁴ There are also social facts about laws, for example, which are not singular facts, but I disregard the extension of my discussion to cases of non-singular social facts.

Second, now that we know that social facts are the items that are needed to explain and be explained, and that the relation in question is the relation of understanding or explanation, it follows that if there is a hermeneutic circle of understanding in the social sciences, it would have to be a hybrid circle. Since, in a hermeneutic circle, the relation R is the relation of explanation or understanding, the circle cannot be a Quinean-like purely concept circle, because it is not concepts that explain concepts. Nor can it be a purely particular circle, since pure particulars do not get explained or understood. The objects of explanation are certainly not just tokens or particulars, but facts like the fact that a certain token or particular has a certain characteristic or feature. Moreover, the hermeneutic circle would have to be a hybrid circle of the second kind. Had the alleged hermeneutic circle been a hybrid circle of the first kind, with a definite number of both concepts and particulars, there would have been some very powerful objections to the very idea of a hermeneutic circle, because of the double temporal location issue.

Assuming that explanation requires certain temporal assumptions (e.g., in general, earlier things explain later ones) and with only a definite supply of both concepts and particulars, singular facts would eventually have had to reappear on a circle, and the reappearance of the same singular fact would have demanded that we date it, or rather what it is about, at two distinct times. But, given an indefinitely large supply of particulars, no singular fact needs appear on the endless different “revolutions” of a hybrid circle of the second kind. On these circles at least, no fact or particular the fact is about will have to occur at two distinct times, whatever R might be.

In the case of the explanation of social facts, the inexhaustibly large number of particulars seems to be an easily satisfiable requirement. The number of particulars that social facts are about might not be an infinite number. Assuming that society started at some time and will end at some time, I also assume that the particulars of which social concepts are true are finite in number as well. But as long as society exists, there will always be new particulars, of which social concepts can be true – more mayors, more presidents, more banks, etc. So for as long as society continues, there will be an inexhaustible supply of particulars for social

⁴ I say a lot more about the distinction between social and non-social properties in my *The Metaphysics of the Social World* (1985, ch. 3).

facts to be about. The number of such particulars is indefinitely large, its limits set only by the limits on the duration of society itself.

Explanations (of facts by facts) come in chains. (Or at least so I will assume here.) One fact explains another, which explains a third, and so on. (On some views of course, non-singular facts would enter the picture at this juncture.) What do such chains look like? Let's assume that every social fact is capable of explanation. (This, by the way, is not a trivial assumption.) Then:

1. Suppose a social fact can be explained only by another social fact.
2. If (1) is true, then either the explanatory chain of social facts is indefinitely long or looping or a hybrid with both characteristics.
3. If (1) is not true, then either some social facts are explained by something other than another social fact or they explain themselves.

(1) is ambiguous: is the supposition that a social fact can be explained only by other social facts, and by nothing else, or is it that in the full explanation of a social fact, some more social facts always play a part, but so might other facts as well? This is an ambiguity that needs more attention, but on either option, the chains will be either indefinitely long or looping. There is no need to disambiguate this for my purposes here. If the chains loop, we obtain a circle. Explanatory circles are looping explanatory chains that are hybrid circles.

Again, consider the simplest example of the second sort of hybrid circle: e's being F explains i's being G, and i's being G explains o's being F. The root idea in such a circle is that something's being an F can explain something else's being a G, and that thing's being a G can explain a third thing's being F. How could that be? Explanatory punch is carried by concepts, not by particulars, and it might not seem possible that F can have that punch in respect of G and G also have the same punch in respect of F, even though the particulars may shift from punch to punch. One might call this the "alleged impossibility of explanatory punch reciprocity of concepts."

However, we *know* from experience that there are legitimate examples of such circles. Consider the following sort of case of reciprocal causal interaction. Wage increases explain higher inflation and higher inflation explains wage increases. These apparently symmetrical cases are not really symmetrical at all once the different tokens and hence the different social facts are introduced: a certain wage increase w at t_1 explains a certain rise in inflation i at t_2 , and that rise in inflation i at t_2 in turn explains another wage increase w^* at t_3 . w is not identical to w^* . Nothing is double temporally located. Such reciprocal causal generalisations are not uncommon, especially in social science.

Call a hybrid circle of the second type “tight” if it has only two concepts (and of course any number of particulars or tokens). Call a hybrid circle of the second type “loose” if it has more than two concepts. It seems to me that tight hybrid circles of the second type are mysterious without further information. How could an F explain a G and some G also explain some F? I postulate that the explanatory force that might attach to reciprocally related concepts of a hybrid circle of the second type, a hermeneutic circle, can only arise if we can show that there are different intermediary steps that interpose themselves between the F and the G and the G and the F. There must be some links in the chain that connect the F with the G and some different links that connect the G with the F. Perhaps the F explains the G only because there is some F* such that the F explains the F* and the F* explains the G. And the G explains the F only because there is some G* such that the G explains the G* and the G* explains the F. So at the more mediate or direct explanatory level, the F* and not the F explains the G and the G* and not the G explains the F. This is certainly the case with the example to hand: the path by which wage rises cause inflation is a different pathway than that by which inflation leads to more wage rises. The mystery of how Fs explain Gs and Gs also explain Fs is then dispelled. If this is so, then hybrid circles of the second type must all be loose circles.

But are there really any hybrid circles of the second type in general or anyway in social science? Let’s assume that there are no inexplicable social facts. Moreover, although there may be facts of some kind that are self-explanatory, social facts do not strike me as a terribly plausible candidate for this status. (Explanation in general may not be irreflexive, but this does not seem relevant for the case of the explanation of singular social fact.) So we are left with four options: (a) there are long chains of social facts that stretch indefinitely, or (b) there are chains of social facts that loop or circle, or (c) there are hybrid chains of social facts that stretch and circle, or (d) some social facts are explicable by something other than social facts.

Of course it would take some very strong reasons to rule out (d), which is not necessarily a reductive position at all: it does not say that some, let alone all, social facts can be reduced to non-social ones. Partly, this will hinge on the connection a theorist makes between reduction and explanation. Even if Taylor were right in the case of texts, that one reading can only be supported by another reading, it is not obvious that the same is true in the case of the explanation of social facts. If at least some social facts can be given full explanations by non-social facts, then both the alleged regress and the circle would be broken. So I think that in order to know that there is a hermeneutic circle (of the only sort I consider

plausible), we also need to establish that no social facts can be given full explanations in terms of non-social facts and nothing in Mantzavinos's chapter or in the literature he cites convinces me that this is so.

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