

Stances in a Praxeological Social Science

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Outline

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2. Praxeological Social Science

Stances in a Praxeological Social Science

A stance refers to a viewpoint about some phenomena. A stance in praxeology (the study of distinctly human action) refers to a stance taken about human beings (*homo sapiens*) who have the characteristics that one associates with being distinctly human (*homo agens*). The aim of this note is to discuss some basic ideas relating to the stances in praxeology.

1. Many Stances

Praxeology requires an ability to take several stances. The first is that of an isolated human actor. In reflecting on one's action, a normal human being¹ tries to conceive of herself in terms of ends and means. Self-reflection leads to one's understanding of the self. Indeed, self-understanding implies that self-reflection has occurred.

The second stance is that of the person who recognizes that she can self-reflect in order to help herself achieve self-understanding. In this stance, she reflects not only on her action, as in the first stance. She also reflects on her self-reflection. When she does this, she becomes aware of her first stance.

The third stance is the stance of a second party who observes a person attempting to achieve self-understanding. There is one person (B) who observes another person (A) reflecting on her (A's) action.

The second and the third stances are regressive, although in different ways. Referring to the second stance, we can conceive of a person reflecting on her reflecting on her action. Referring to the third stance, we can conceive of B observing A reflecting on her reflecting on her action, and so on. Or we can conceive of B observing A who observes B reflecting on himself and so on.

¹1. Mises refers to the normal human being on p. 252 of *Human Action*.

The fourth stance involves a third party. In the fourth stance, we conceive of C reflecting on B's reflections about A's action. Then we can conceive of C reflecting on B's reflections about A's actions. And so on. This stance is regressive also.

The fifth stance is that of the social scientist who is able to conceive of and adopt the first four stances. This stance is a necessary beginning point for understanding praxeology in the social sciences, but it is not sufficient. In addition, one must grant as a matter of principle the possibility that the subjects of social science can achieve any mental state we can imagine and even states that we cannot imagine.

2. Praxeological Social Science

We are now ready to understand praxeological social science. To do so, take still a sixth stance – that of the outsider observing praxeological social scientists. In this stance, we see the praxeological social scientist as a person who is trying to *understand* the actions and interactions of some number of subjects. The social scientist assumes that she can know something about the self-reflection performed by others through her own self-reflection. And she assumes that she knows something about how subjects attempt to understand each other. Since her task is to understand interaction, she must in effect try to understand their understanding. In other words, she must try to understand each subject's understanding of himself and of other subjects.

We can deduce from this discussion that the praxeological social scientist must employ various fundamental assumptions when she proceeds to understand subjects. She must assume that she can form a useful understanding of others by assuming that the results of their self-reflection are in some way similar to the results of her own self-reflection. If the social scientist could not assume this – if she thought that her self-reflection led to different results than the self-reflection of her subjects – she would have no basis for believing that she could understand her subjects. Social science would be futile.

In different terms, the praxeological social scientist must make *a priori* assumptions about the nature of human action. She must assume that she and the subjects she studies act in conjunction with similar mental processes that are inexorably linked to ends and means.

References

von Mises, Ludwig (1966). *Human Action: A Treatise on Economics*. Chicago: Henry Regnery Company.

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