

Erasmus Institute for Philosophy and Economics (EIPE)

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Thesis title

Explaining the Unintended Consequences of Human Action: An Inquiry into the Explanatory Value of Conjectures In Social Science

Supervisors

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Project description

This thesis examines one particular type of explaining practice in social sciences (especially in economics), namely the explanation of emergence of institutions (conventions, and norms) as the unintended consequences of human action, from a methodological and philosophical perspective. One specific characteristic of these explanations is that they seem to lack empirical content and thus they can be (and they are) criticised as being simple conjectures with no explanatory value. This thesis qualifies this statement and argues that they are conjectures about the possible mechanisms that might bring about the institutions at stake. But this does not immediately answer the questions about the explanatory value of these explanations. To deal with these issues one has to understand what conjectures and possible mechanisms are.

This thesis addresses these issues and argues that these conjectures are valuable (or have explanatory value) because they alert us to certain mechanisms that might exist in the real world and because they provide insights about the complex (causal) structure of the social world. Case studies include Menger's explanation of the origin of money, Schelling's checkerboard model of segregation, and evolutionary game theoretic accounts of emergence of conventions.

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