



Unintended Consequences

Author(s): Richard Vernon

Source: *Political Theory*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (Feb., 1979), pp. 57-73

Published by: [Sage Publications, Inc.](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/190824>

Accessed: 25/08/2010 15:52

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=sage>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Sage Publications, Inc. is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Political Theory*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES

RICHARD VERNON
University of Western Ontario

THAT ACTIONS REGULARLY BRING about consequences unintended by the actor is scarcely a controversial point. According to Robert Merton, "virtually every substantial contributor to the long history of social thought" has dealt with the matter;¹ Sartre would remove even these qualifications, for "everybody has always known," he once wrote, that "the consequences of our actions always end up by escaping us."² But, if the notion of unintended consequences may border on the obvious, one should not fail to take note of the extraordinarily varied and nonobvious inferences that have been drawn from it. A very few examples may help to display this.

(1) Sir Karl Popper, who has done as much as anyone in the last few decades to familiarise us with the notion, places unintended consequences in the front line of defence of "methodological individualism."³ *Qua* "unintended," they do not fall into the domain of psychological explanations of intending, willing, or so on; *qua* "consequences," they arise from individual actions and from coincidences and collisions among them. At one stroke, then, the stress upon unintended consequences banishes the twin dangers of psychologism on the one hand and "holism" on the other: they are specifically *social* things, and hence irreducible to individual psychology, yet they do not involve any fallacious appeal to "social wholes" or the like. Interestingly, quite comparable arguments appear (in an utterly different style) in Sartre's *Critique* and his treatise on method; for Sartre, likewise, wishes to criticise the appeal to supra-individual "forces" which appears in certain Marxian writings. Unintended consequences figure as an explanatory bridge between the "human" character of action and the "alien" character of history

(2) But if unintended consequences are put to use as evidence for individualist positions of various kinds of styles they appear too, with some prominence, in the thinking of that arch-"holist" Hegel. For Hegel wished to substitute an historical and retrospective rationality for a

rationality grounded in mere subjective ideals; and he did so (in part) by claiming that the meaning of an action is revealed in the sequence to which it contributes rather than the intentions from which it emerged. It is not, then, to intentions ("the ideals which imagination sets up") that we should look, but to the sequential whole composed by those further effects which actions bring about.⁴

(3) If Hegel connected unintended consequences with an essentially retrospective philosophy, Marx and Engels connected them with a prospective vision. Unintended consequences are a feature not of "history" in general but of "past history," an expression of the inherently self-defeating tendencies of a competitive and inegalitarian society. "History is made in such a way that the final result always arises from conflicts between many individual wills . . . Thus there are innumerable intersecting forces, an infinite series of parallelograms of forces, which give rise to one resultant—the historical event . . . For what each individual wills is obstructed by everyone else, and what emerges is something that no one willed. Thus past history proceeds in the manner of a natural process . . ."⁵ If this is so, then we may imagine a future order in which the rational coordination of efforts brings about a course of events which will have been consciously intended.

(4) Directly, and also through the mediation of Hegel, who put his reading of Adam Smith to good use,⁶ Marx and Engels drew upon the sociology of the 18th-century Scottish school. The views of Smith and Ferguson and Hume, however, are put to a diametrically opposed use by F.A. Hayek, who regards some unintended consequences not at all as an expression of ultimately fatal contradictions, but as the foundation of an order more free and efficient than any other.⁷

(5) In the doctrines of Smith, Ferguson, and Hume we may detect a far-reaching rejection of the contractualism of early modern political science and jurisprudence, and the beginnings at least of a transition to a social science in the current sense.⁸ In Hume's essay "Of the Original Contract" this is strikingly clear, for Hume seeks to substitute a picture of gradual unwilled process for a doctrine of rational construction.⁹ Hayek follows this logic, connecting the idea of unintended consequences essentially with the existence of a social science, a view in which he is joined by Popper.¹⁰ Yet in Hayek's thinking the stress upon unintended consequences is *also* connected with something very much like a contractual theory with Rawlsian overtones. The unintended consequences of the market order impose upon us a "veil of ignorance," in Rawls' phrase, and oblige us to commit ourselves to "abstract" rules

of justice without knowing how their application will affect our own interests.¹¹

(6) The connection between unintended consequences and ignorance is made by many authors, notably by Merton in his 1936 paper (one of the very few writings to discuss the topic in any depth). That we do not know what all the consequences of our action will be is further connected with a view that social planning is subject to very severe limitations; the “latent” meaning of institutions is largely unknown to us, and in changing them we risk destroying their positive hidden value. Yet if unintended consequences are traced to ignorance, then (it is argued by others) enlightenment will eliminate or greatly reduce them, and unintended consequences are thus incorporated within a doctrine of immanent progress, not a conservative doctrine of caution. Such a view occurs in theorists of planning from Saint-Simon to Karl Mannheim¹² and doubtless beyond; it also occurs, in a more muted form, in Popper, though his interest in reducing unintended consequences cuts sharply across his express admiration for Hayek’s argument.¹³

Clearly, there is room for extensive research into what Merton called “the vast scope and manifold implications of [this] problem.” But one may also feel that there is room for scepticism: can such radically disparate claims be drawn from the same phenomenon, and can such an apparently simple fact—which “everybody has always known” about—sustain such large speculative assertions? In this paper I wish principally to argue that the notion of unintended consequences collapses together a number of quite distinct mechanisms of change, and that none of these mechanisms will bear as much weight as has often been supposed.

I

Unintended consequences may arise as the cumulative outcome of similar actions performed simultaneously or consecutively by a number of actors. One of the examples offered by Popper in *The Poverty of Historicism* clearly belongs to this category (others do not). Many people acquire a taste for “mountains and solitude”: they all visit the mountains and consequently cannot enjoy solitude there.¹⁴ This is presented by Popper as a paradigm example (in its logic, rather than its content) of the sort of phenomenon that the social sciences should concern themselves with. We may never entirely understand such things

as taste, but we can come to understand the patterns of events brought about by a certain taste, patterns which are not contained in the taste itself. Tastes are "wayward," and unpromising material for analysis; but the observable patterns of effects constitute an object for the social sciences, the divergence between intention and outcomes creating a space for causal explanation.

For some purposes we may wish to distinguish such an example from another kind of cumulative effect discussed by Sartre. Many Chinese peasants fell trees in order to extend their arable land: deforestation produces erosion and flooding.¹⁵ Flooding is not a logical implication of felling trees, in the way that overcrowding is a logical implication of the presence of many people in a place valued for the solitude which it once offered: it is a consequence related to the actions which produced it by complex causal laws ("geological and hydrographic"). Popper's example involves only a "threshold" effect, Sartre's a "trigger" effect in addition. But both involve a kind of transformation of quantity into quality, the effects of n instances of x differing obviously from those of some smaller value of x .

The damaging problem with this category of unintended consequences is that it often shades without discontinuity into a matter of simple redescription; that is, the so-called "consequence" may be nothing more than a summary. One clear exception is an example such as Sartre's, in which actions cumulatively trigger some complex natural process which intervenes decisively between intentions and outcome. But what is involved here is of course a set of natural laws, not laws of social science. In cases where this does not apply matters are less clear. As it happens, two recent commentaries have independently made this point in the context of two noteworthy cases. H. B. Acton has suggested that Adam Smith's doctrine of the "invisible hand" is, in part, only an entirely unsurprising account of the way in which a society made up of prudent and economical people is, indeed, very likely to be prudently and economically managed.¹⁶ Samuel Coleman has pointed out that the "latent effects" which Robert Merton attributes to machine politics were both foreseen and wanted (by someone) and scarcely "latent" at all.¹⁷

If one turns to Popper's example in the light of these comments one sees how well chosen it is to make its point. Since the intended outcome of a trip to the mountains is solitude one man may enjoy it *wholly* while n men cannot enjoy it at all. In the transition from one to n there is, therefore, a transition from positive to negative values, and thus a clear discontinuity. But suppose we change the example: one tourist drops the

wrappings of his packed lunch in the Alps—the effect is negligible: *n* tourists do so, and the effect is dreadful. The transition here, though still significant, involves a multiplication, not a change of signs; and there are good reasons for thinking that this example might be more relevant than Popper's own. For Popper's case draws a good part of its force from the fact that, in modern societies, mass consumption acts as a powerful multiplier of the consequences of "taste," and it is in this context that cumulative effects do indeed become crucially important. It is tempting to call this the Tocqueville effect, for it was Tocqueville who first suggested a strong linkage between social equality and the production of unintended consequences.¹⁸

What raises difficulties here is that, in the case of such cumulative effects, judgments about what has been intentionally done are particularly fluid, and subject to shifting redefinitions.¹⁹ Of course, where the effects concerned are strictly unforeseeable, the question of intentionality does not arise: the range of what we can be said to intend is bounded by what we know, and consequences which step beyond the boundaries of knowledge at the time of acting provide a genuine (though perhaps rather narrow) class of unintended consequences. In the more usual cases in which events are foreseeable but not foreseen, or foreseen but neglected or discounted or risked, we reenter the "wayward" domain of subjectivity, for explanations will involve accounts of the agents' perceptions, their priorities, and their prudence or lack of it. And where the events are the cumulative effect of many people's actions, our willingness to ascribe or absolve from responsibility depends entirely upon the degree of foresight and restraint which, in the context, we expect each individual to exercise.

Legal theorists have sometimes argued that the intentionality of an action is affected by the perceived closeness of act and outcome. This is obviously an unsatisfactorily subjective criterion, but it is hard to see how it could be avoided. Consider the hypothetical mad surgeon who does not *intend* to kill, who only intends to remove the patient's heart: neither a court nor public opinion would find much difficulty in cutting through this distinction, philosophically defensible though it may be, for the act of removing someone's heart is so closely related to the act of killing that it should be regarded merely as a case of it.²⁰ The mad surgeon did indeed kill, intentionally, for in important matters of this kind we subsume particular actions directly within a general category, overriding the agent's description of what he is doing by a standard public description. We do so in the light of expectations,

which may vary over time, about the degree of responsibility which we think an actor *should* assume. A “wayward” moral component enters fundamentally into the definition of the category itself.

What apparently distinguishes cumulative effects from cases of legal responsibility is that an agent who contributes to a cumulative effect is not in a position to avoid the effect by his own action, for his own contribution, taken singly, is negligible. The guilty party, we might be inclined to say, is some nonarraignable entity such as a “lifestyle” (or a “taste”), innocent enough in its particular instances, gravely damaging in its totality. But actually this hardly departs from a legal context of concerns at all. For, while in many cases laws may simply record and enforce a preexisting moral responsibility, in other cases the point of a law is to create and impose a responsibility which was not there before, precisely because some harmless enough action would be unacceptable if widely practised. We do not imagine, after all, that each individual who breaks a law would have intended all the consequences which would follow from infringements of it *en masse*: yet we punish particular infringements all the same, even though it may be only the threat of large-scale infringement that worries us.

In short, there are problems here of a conceptual order rather than (as is claimed) problems uniquely suitable to the formation of causal laws. Even to speak of “the unintended consequences of action” is to imply a firm distinction which we are not always, or even usually, in a position to make, for how far “consequences” are separate from “action” is often a vexed question. There are always various ways of characterising an action, some of which will include what on other characterisations are only consequences of it.²¹ New characterisations of actions may emerge, shifts of language fuse acts with their effects, and we are no longer *doing* what we did before.

On this point Sartre, for his part, appears to speak with two voices (as Popper does too, I shall argue later). For on the one hand, he insists that unforeseen and damaging results do not change what he calls the “profound reality” of action, that is, the lived intention.²² But this assertion supplies only a poor guide to what Sartre actually does, for this (Cartesian) intending *ego* is placed in the context of (Hegelian and Marxian) “mediations.” Sartre admires the Marx of the *18e brumaire* for attempting the “difficult” task of bridging intention and result, and the method which Sartre outlines is meant to imitate this feat, simultaneously “progressing” from one to the other and “regressing” back. In the complete sequence we see more of the actor and his circumstances

than was explicitly contained in his purpose: in the Chinese floods we see the expression not only of “geological and hydrographic” laws but also of the “atomised” condition of the peasants, a condition which they have assumed and lived.²³

It may seem unduly strict to apply this method to Popper’s Alpine tourist, and to point out (as an unkind Sartrean might) that he is the victim not only of circumstances but of an internal paradox, that of fashionable solitude: but it seems too strict only because the case is so innocuous. We may raise the moral temperature simply by our choice of examples. Progressing through the unintended production of littered mountains (a result of mere carelessness), and the unintended production of ecological damage (a result of unexceptional acquisitiveness), we may arrive at a dramatic case which has been waiting in the wings all the while: that of the unintended production of tyranny by acts of quite ordinary acquiescence. As we do so, we feel less and less inclined to sever result quite clearly from intention: and when we reach the last-mentioned case, having understood the banality of evil we may well wish to insist upon the evils of banality

II

Unintended consequences arise also from the simultaneous or consecutive performance of dissimilar actions by individuals or groups. If Tocqueville, who apparently had cumulative effects in mind, saw social homogeneity as the source of unintended consequences, this second type is more readily associated with heterogeneity and diversity. Consequently, we must set alongside Tocqueville’s argument various other doctrines in which either the social division of labour or the dispersed control of capital, or both, are presented as the source of unintended consequences; sometimes with the implication that a more homogeneous or “consensual” form of society, will (*pace* Tocqueville) experience only intended consequences. But the unintended consequences arising from diversity of ends, as we have noted already, are sometimes seen as emphatically good; they may be seen (as in Hayek) in the light of immanent spontaneous cooperation, no less than (as in Engels) in the light of destructive contradictions.

No word seems quite right as a label for this category of unintended consequences. But what Hayek (following von Mises) calls *catallactic*

effects are an especially important case, and we may adopt this term for the whole without serious risk of confusion. "Catalaxy" is the term which Hayek offers in place of "economy": the latter word, he argues, applies more properly to an organisation such as a business enterprise, and in applying it to the order which such enterprises compose we may be led to see it as a kind of large organisation, which it is not.²⁴ It is an order spontaneously brought about by multiple transactions or exchanges (*katallatein*: "to exchange") among organisations. It is not a willed or designed or contrived thing, like an organisational hierarchy, but the unintended outcome of many independent decisions. Hayek explains that such an "order" has advantages which a contrived "organisation" can never have. Especially, contrivance presupposes that decisions are to be made by a single actor, the contriver or planner, whose knowledge, however, is essentially limited: whereas a spontaneous order rests upon decisions made locally by many actors whose aggregate knowledge is much greater than any single actor could have. Moreover, Hayek (unlike Popper) directs his objections not only against attempts to "organise" in a total or "utopian" way but also against more modest "interferences" with the order, which he alleges, always disrupt it. The role of legislation is only to provide a context of essentially general or abstract rules, rules not directed at particular ends nor imposed upon particular persons, which enable men to conduct their transactions in security. It follows necessarily that the general outcomes produced by the order are unintended. For it is no one's business to intend them.

It turns out to be more difficult than may appear at first sight to define what it is that Hayek regards as the "order." Very frequently he refers to it as something "brought about" by multiple exchanges; it is something that "the market system leads to."²⁵ "System" is, at an earlier point, defined as synonymous with "order,"²⁶ so that to speak of the "order" as arising from the "system" is a little puzzling: but "system" here is evidently meant to refer to a manner of doing things, a set of rule-governed procedures. Initially, then, we may regard the "order" as that complex of events and outcomes which arise as the side-effects of the decisions of enterprises and consumers. However, Hayek says that we can never come to know all this, for it is too vast and fluid for the mind to grasp.²⁷

We can of course report intelligibly on an order which we cannot exhaustively describe. The description of a cricket match at half past three is potentially inexhaustible, but we can provide an account of the

“state of play” which picks out its most relevant features. This is something that could well be described as a “spontaneous order”: no one intended that the state of play should be such-and-such at that point, that it is such-and-such arises spontaneously from the competing intentions and relative levels of skill of the two teams, together with whatever chance has contributed. But it cannot quite be this that Hayek has in mind. The “order” of the catallaxy “must leave undetermined the degree to which the several particular needs will be met”:²⁸ it would be absurd to say that the state of play does not determine particularities, for it is nothing but an abridged statement of particularities. Moreover, the “order,” which is essentially “abstract,” is to be distinguished from whatever “results” may contingently emerge from it.²⁹

Here we may be driven to the view that the “order” is, after all, the game itself, for a game could well be described as leaving particular outcomes undetermined. Indeed, at one point Hayek explicitly defines the catallaxy as “a game,” that is, “a contest played according to “rules.”³⁰ Of course, to accept this view would involve setting aside the other passages in which Hayek speaks of the rules (or the “system,” presumably rule-governed procedures) as bringing about the “order,” and not as constituting it. But we might agree to do so in order to take account of the occasional references to the rules themselves as an “order.”³¹ However, if we did so, we would confront further difficulties. When Hayek describes the “order” as “abstract,” he means, he says, that it must be mentally reconstructed from the sets of outcomes;³² and obviously the rules of a game are not things that are reconstructed from the outcomes of the game, but known regulations which govern its playing.

Given these uncertainties in the idea of “order,” what Hayek means by its “disruption” by governmental interference is also puzzling. If the “order” is some state of affairs brought about by various decisions, then interference will indeed disrupt it: but so will every economic action by an enterprise or a consumer, just each run “disrupts” the existing state of play in a cricket match. On the other hand, if the “order” is taken to be the rules, or the game itself, interference will be disruptive in a different sense: it is simply an infringement. This is what Hayek stresses, for the most part, in his account of disruption: purposeful interference, he says, is “unjust,” if justice is identified with abstract and non-purposeful rules.³³ This is a purely analytic argument: but Hayek treats it as though it supplied a reason not to infringe the order, when actually it is no more than a definition of what an infringement is.

We can perhaps make better sense of Hayek's argument if we take "order" to be a value-term. It is neither the outcomes nor an abridged report on the outcomes nor a set of rules or procedures—though all of these sometimes seem to be the "order"—but a kind of orderliness or integration. By following the rules which Hayek sets out, a society is able, he contends, to make more efficient use of its resources than by any other means, and thus to increase everyone's chances of benefit, without prescribing any particular person's fate. It does this by "encoding" information about goods in their prices, so that by following simple self-interest, and buying a cheaper good rather than a more expensive equivalent, less scarce goods are substituted for more scarce ones. "Thus in the market order [N.B.] each is made by the visible gain to himself to serve needs which to him are invisible, and in order to do so to avail himself of to him unknown particular circumstances which put him in the position to satisfy those needs at as small a cost as possible in terms of other things which it is possible to produce instead."³⁴

A "code," of course, works only if people know how to read it. The "reading" of the price code involves a disposition to prefer the relatively inexpensive to the relatively expensive; and we may say, with confidence, that when a society is made up of persons so disposed the society as a whole will make use of relatively less scarce resources when more scarce resources increase in price. It is less clear, however, that this orderliness or efficiency, the matching of resources and needs, is a spontaneous incidental outcome of many individual contributions. That the price of this or that good should be such-and-such is of course unintended by anyone in Hayek's catallaxy, but the *orderliness* is not at all an incidental outcome of individuals' behaviour but simply a re-statement, in a larger context, of the individuals' own disposition. It is, in other words, simply a cumulative effect.

Likewise, the supposed "integrative" effects of the catallaxy would appear to be more convincingly explained as the product of consensus than as an unintended outcome. Hayek notes that in the catallactic order many people's expectations are disappointed, for they are subject to sudden sharp fluctuations in the market value of the goods which they offer. This leads to "resentment," which is of course disintegrative. But men should overcome their resentments by realising that it is "only fair" to accept one's misfortunes when others must do so too.³⁵ Given this staunch devotion to the rules, there is little enough left for unintended consequences to explain: if people resolutely agree that things should be done in such-and-such a way, then that things *are* done in

such-and-such a way springs directly from their agreement. It is here that Hayek's argument takes its contractualist turn, shifting from the spontaneous emergence of effects from actions to the foundation of political and juridical structure in convention or consent.

In this way the very notion of a spontaneous order is brought into question. To be sure, Hayek distinguishes between the spontaneity of the order and the deliberateness of the rules which sustain it; the order may be spontaneous even if the rules are not.³⁶ Men may then consciously agree upon a certain way of proceeding, knowing and intending the outcome in general terms, although they still cannot predict particular outcomes. Hayek offers, as an analogy, the case of the chemist who knows that the molecules of a substance are arranged in a certain form or pattern, but who cannot predict which molecule will occupy which place in the structure.³⁷ To this argument there are, however, two decisive objections. The first is that Hayek repeatedly identifies the form, not the details of it, as the "order," and thus on his own argument the order in question would not be spontaneous but intended. The second is that, in the light of this argument, the very idea of a designed structure becomes entirely inconceivable, and there is nothing left to contrast spontaneous order with. For it is always possible (as an admirer of Hume should surely admit) to imagine a further level of more detailed arrangement which is ignored in the agent's description of his action. Driving a nail into a piece of wood would count as the creation of a spontaneous order, for even if one drove the nail in at the precisely intended point to the precisely intended depth one would not predict or intend the precise arrangement of wood fibres brought about by the nail's entry. Any event, even one most straightforwardly assignable to purposes is undesigned in this very strict sense. But that does not mean it is unintended. Hayek perhaps represents the paradox of a profoundly anti-Cartesian thinker who nevertheless appears to insist upon a Cartesian notion of "intention" as a clear and distinct design, in order to insulate action wholly from the processes which he finds important.

III

A third principal type of unintended consequence is depicted by Buster Keaton in his film, *The General*, more brilliantly than any

social scientist has (to my knowledge) managed to do.³⁸ Falling into a river, the hero and heroine are swept towards some fearful rapids; using a rope, conveniently tied around his waist in an earlier sequence, Keaton lashes himself to a log on the bank; but the log comes loose, and he is swept towards the rapids more hopelessly than before. Arriving at the rapids, however, the log is jammed between two rocks, and Keaton is left suspended over the torrent; as the heroine, in turn, arrives at the rapids, Keaton is able to swing sideways to catch her; on the reverse swing, the rope breaks, depositing Keaton and the heroine on the bank. What is displayed here is a constantly shifting relation between instruments (log and rope), eventual end (survival), and mediate end (projects). As the context shifts, projects and instruments acquire unforeseen uses and meanings. We may call this category of unintended consequences "contextual change." It is of indisputable importance to the social and political sciences, for only in an unimaginably stable society would its logic fail to apply. Of course, its importance will vary directly with the rate and scope of change: and if Tocqueville's model picks out progressive social equality as the cause of unintended consequences, while Engels' and Hayek's picks out diversification, this category singles out change itself, whatever its direction.

One of the most important things to be said about this category is that one cannot hope, even in principle, to eliminate it. The context which determines the significance of some action or event is in large part of matter of knowledge, for our assessments of the significance of something depend upon what we know about it. But we cannot predict what we will later know but do not yet know, for if we could we would know it already.³⁹ When Popper says, therefore, that our "increasing knowledge" will considerably reduce the occurrence of unintended consequences, we must except this third category from his claim. In fact, if we assume (as seems plausible) a faster rate of change in scientific knowledge than in common sense, it would follow that the application of scientific knowledge to social policy would, in this respect, *increase* the occurrence of unintended consequences, for the knowledge upon which we will have based our decisions will more rapidly become obsolete. And since we have no way of weighing the increase thus produced against the decrease produced in other respects, it does not seem that we can confidently predict any diminution of unintended consequences.

Such suggestions bear more heavily against Engels' entirely utopian suggestion, however, than on Popper's view, which is expressed in

tentative terms. Engels traces the occurrence of “what no one has willed” exclusively to the fact of conflict among actors: that is, to “catallactic” effects, most obviously, and also to “cumulative” effects in the sense that shared ends may lead to conflict if resources are scarce. If we suppose that some perfectly contrived order could eliminate both categories of effect, by means of coordinating individual efforts, we would still find that it confronted “what no one had willed,” for what anyone can will depends upon what they currently know, and what they (or others) know later will change the meaning of what they have done.

As far as methodological questions go, once more, perhaps even more than in the other cases, we confront the problem of boundaries. Neither a clear nor an indisputable line marks such unintended consequences off from intended consequences; in fact the category appears to involve an assumption of intentional continuity. Another of Popper’s examples in *the Poverty of Historicism* makes this clear. Language, he says, is an “undesigned social institution,” and he offers this as a case of the unintended production of effects;⁴⁰ but it seems entirely different from his example of the overcrowded mountains. Overcrowding is an event or situation: what is unintended in the growth of language is that new *uses* arise for practices originally intended for simpler and more limited purposes. An unforeseen event may be wanted or unwanted, but a use is necessarily wanted (by someone); and this new use may not be wholly distinguishable from the original use. We may subsume both (in this case) under the desire and the need for communication. No doubt we may imagine other examples in which a practice is transferred from one context to a radically different one: but here, surely, we would have trouble in thinking of this new use as a *consequence* of the original practice, for entirely exogenous factors would have intervened, and the explanatory power of the original practice would thus have become marginal.

This category of unintended consequences involves questions which come very close to those debated by literary critics who have closely and interestingly examined what might be meant by the “intention” of an author. In a remarkable paper F. Cioffi cites the case of Blake’s poem “Jerusalem”:⁴¹ the “dark satanic mills” to which he refers have often been taken to be cotton mills, whereas Blake intended a reference to “the mills of God,” a satiric expression of his for the established church. Cioffi argues, rightly, I think, that we cannot simply rule out the “cotton mills” reading as wrong, for it enlarges upon and extends the force of the original intention. What we might say, perhaps—I do

not know if this is what Cioffi had in mind—is that a critique of religious hierarchy comes to be read as a critique of industrial hierarchy, and the continuity of meaning and sentiment is thus preserved. On the other hand, enlarging further upon Cioffi's point, we could not take the line to refer to James and John Stuart—tempting though it is—for this idea introduces a cheap pun (as opposed to Blake's rather good pun) which damages the quality of the line. In short, the boundaries of intention are a matter of critical assessment.

With this we arrive at the case of the idealist argument that has run alongside, and in opposition to, the scientific models of social and historical investigation. For Hegel's view was that the course of events unfolds more fully the content of intentions, displaying with greater completeness what had been "latent" in them. Especially this is so in that intentions are rarely quite definite or unmixed: "The human agents have before them limited aims, special interests. But they are also intelligent, thinking beings. Their purposes are interwoven with general and essential considerations of law, the good, duty, etc."⁴² What they do eventually brings to light the "general and essential" submerged in their local and partial views. T. H. Green constructs a convenient example: Napoleon, Green says, was governed by a passion for glory, but "the passion was itself governed by social influences, operative on him, from which it derived its particular direction . . . [H]e could only glorify himself in the greatness of France; and, though the national spirit expressed itself in an effort after greatness which was, in many ways, of a mischievous and delusive kind, yet it again had so much of what may be called the spirit of humanity in it, that it required satisfaction in the belief that it was serving mankind. Hence the aggrandisement of France, in which Napoleon's passion for glory satisfied itself, had to take at least the semblance of a deliverance of oppressed peoples, and in taking the semblance it, to a great extent, performed the reality"⁴³

Doubtless, as a general view of historical change, this is at least as vulnerable as the scientifically-conceived model of rigorously separable causes and effects. But there is also something of value in it, enough, anyway, to show the weakness of Popper's view that if men only did what they intended there would be nothing left for an observer to explore⁴⁴—what is "intended," on this idealist argument, is itself a difficult and eminently important object of enquiry. We will be necessarily drawn towards this pole to the extent that we consider such things as the history of ideas, or art, or culture, and to the extent that we

consider history in general to be constituted by, or to resemble, such fields.

Another case of great relevance, of course, to Popper, is the history of science which, as has recently been shown, provides an especially striking paradigm for the idealists' notions of historical continuity. Scientific ideas, like historical actions according to Hegel, "bear an internal connection to possible futures which will emend, or change, or incorporate the idea."⁴⁵ When we trace out the succession of scientific ideas, therefore, we will want to bring out, above all, that "internal connection" between one discovery and another, rather than constructing an episodic series of discrete discoveries. This is *exactly* what Popper does in his account of scientific advance, in which the subjectivity of the scientist is wholly obliterated, and the evolution of knowledge figures as a continuous collective process of "work."⁴⁶ It is true, of course, that a society does not, by any means, share all the features of a scientific community and it is not true that a model applicable to science is simply transferrable to history in general. But some features of a society's development are more appropriately explained in the light of Popper's treatment of the history of science than by means of those techniques which he draws from the interior of science itself, and which require us to erect rigid boundaries between what we mean to do and what we accomplish, since only "*external* connections" among particulars lend themselves to causal explanation.

IV

I hope to have shown that different theorists have had different things in mind when dealing with unintended consequences, some having had at least two in mind at once without distinguishing between them; that the different mechanisms involved are such that no blanket explanation of unintended consequences (such as "ignorance" or "conflict") is persuasive; that no particular kind of society or polity is, in general, more or less likely to experience unintended consequences than any other kind; that, in each case, the boundaries between unintended and intended consequences are questionable. In this way I hope to have suggested that the idea of unintended consequences is not a promising foundation for political programmes, whether conservative, or liberal, or technocratic, or revolutionary any more than it is for a methodology or for a useful definition of the social sciences.

NOTES

1. "The Unanticipated Consequences of Purposive Social Action," *American Sociological Review*, I (1936). p. 894.
2. *Critique de la raison dialectique* (Paris, 1960) p. 39.
3. See especially *The Poverty of Historicism* (London, 1961).
4. See especially *Reason in History* [Eng. trans.] (Indianapolis & New York, 1953), and the fine new commentary by George Dennis O'Brien, *Hegel on Reason and History* (Chicago, 1975); also Shlomo Avineri, "The Instrumentality of Passion in the World of Reason," *Political Theory*, I (1973), pp. 388-397.
5. "Letter to Joseph Bloch," in R. C. Tucker (ed.) *The Marx-Engels Reader* (New York, 1972), p. 641.
6. Hegel's use of Smith is discussed by Jean Hyppolite, *Studies on Marx and Hegel*, [Eng. trans.] (London, 1969); see also R. C. Tucker, "The Cunning of Reason in Hegel and Marx," *Review of Politics*, 18 (1956), pp. 269-293.
7. See especially Hayek's trilogy in progress, *Law, Legislation, and Liberty*, (London, 1973).
8. See Duncan Forbes' introduction to Adam Ferguson, *An Essay on the History of Civil Society* (Edinburgh, 1966).
9. Charles W. Hendel (ed.) *Hume's Political Essays*, (New York, 1953), pp. 43-61.
10. *Law, Legislation, and Liberty*, Vol. I, pp. 20 and 37; and Popper's *Conjectures and Refutations* (London, 1963), pp. 124 and 342. A similar point is made by Merton, *On Theoretical Sociology* (New York, 1967), p. 119.
11. For Hayek on Rawls, see *Law, Legislation, and Liberty*, Vol. II, 100.
12. *Man and Society in an Age of Reconstruction* (London, 1940).
13. Noting that many institutions are unintended products, Popper writes: "today, things may begin to be different, owing to our slowly increasing knowledge of society" (*The Open Society and Its Enemies*, Vol. II, 1962, pp. 93-94). I have discussed this divergence between Hayek's views and some of Popper's views in "The Great Society' and the 'Open Society'," *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, IX (1976), pp. 261-276.
14. *The Poverty of Historicism*, p. 158.
15. *Critique de la raison dialectique*, p. 232 ff.
16. "Distributive Justice, the Invisible Hand, and the Cunning of Reason," *Political Studies*, XX (1972), pp. 426-429.
17. "Is There Reason in Tradition?" in P. King and B. Parekh (eds.) *Politics and Experience* (Cambridge, 1968), pp. 266-270.
18. *Democracy in America* [Eng. trans.] (New York, 1961), Vol. II, pp. 17 and 105.
19. Here, for brevity's sake, I give very short shrift to some difficult philosophical questions. See G.E.M. Anscombe, *Intention* (Oxford, 1958), and the Symposium: "Intentions," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supp. Vol. XXIX (1955), pp. 131-164.
20. The example was constructed by Glanville Williams, and is discussed by Anthony Kenny: "Intention and Purpose in Law," in Robert S. Summers (ed.) *Essays in Legal Philosophy* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1968), p. 149 ff.
21. Cf. Y. N. Chopra, "The Consequences of Human Actions," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, N. S. LXV (1964-65) pp. 147-167.
22. *Critique de la raison dialectique*, p. 63.

23. *Ibid.*, 234.
24. *Law, Legislation, and Liberty*, Vol. II, p. 107 ff.
25. *Ibid.*, pp. 108-109 and 115.
26. *Law, Legislation, and Liberty*, Vol. I, p. 35.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 41.
28. *Law, Legislation, and Liberty*, Vol. II, p. 114.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 29.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 115
31. *Ibid.*, p. 27.
32. *Law, Legislation, and Liberty*, Vol. I, p. 38.
33. *Law, Legislation and Liberty*, Vol. II, p. 129. The two kinds of "order" at issue here are discussed by Henri Bergson in *Creative Evolution* [Eng. trans] (London, 1911), p. 244 ff.
34. *Law, Legislation, and Liberty*, Vol. II, p. 116.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 128.
36. *Law, Legislation, and Liberty*, Vol. I, pp. 45-46.
37. *Ibid.*, p. 40.
38. Samuel Coleman comes closest in the paper cited above (note 17). I describe this sequence from Keaton's film from memory, and may have slipped up on this or that detail.
39. As Maurice Cranston points out in *Freedom: A New Analysis*, 3rd edition, (London, 1967), pp. 118-119.
40. *The Poverty of Historicism*, p. 65. Unintended consequences are generally discussed in this much more positive light in Popper's later *Objective Knowledge* (Oxford, 1972), especially chapter 3.
41. "Intention and Interpretation in Criticism," in Cyril Barrett (ed.) *Collected Papers on Aesthetics* (Oxford, 1965), pp. 161-183.
42. O'Brien, op. cit., p. 118.
43. *Lectures on the Principles of Political Obligation* (London, 1941), pp. 133-134. It should, perhaps, be pointed out that this is entirely different from the psychological notion of unconscious motivation, a subject which I omit here.
44. *Conjectures and Refutations*, p. 124.
45. O'Brien, op. cit., p. 31. The distinction between the "rational" evolution of science and a "causal" process was made by A.-A. Cournot in a neglected book, *Considerations sur la marche des idées et des événements dans les temps modernes* (Paris, 1872).
46. *Objective Knowledge*, chapter 3.

Richard Vernon is Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Western Ontario. His publications include a forthcoming study of Georges Sorel, Commitment and Change (University of Toronto Press), and papers in the Journal of the History of Ideas, Review of Politics, and Canadian Journal of Political Science: he is co-author (with F. M. Barnard) of an earlier paper in Political Theory (1975). He is currently completing a book on The Secular Polity.