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The Explanation of Action in History¹

1. Introduction

This paper focuses on two confluences which frequently appear within the philosophy of history and other fields concerned with action explanation. The first of these, which I call the *Conflating View of Reasons*, states that the reasons for which we perform actions are reasons why (those events which are) our actions occur. The second, more general confluence, which I call the *Conflating View of Action Explanation*, states that whatever explains why an agent performed a certain action explains why (that event which was) her action occurred. Both confluences ignore the fact that there are at least two distinct objects that legitimately qualify as objects of action explanation². As Jennifer Hornsby (1993) has previously suggested, one thing we might wish to explain is ‘why did A do what she did?’ another is, ‘why did the event of her doing it occur?’

I shall argue that when these two views are combined they give rise to a futile debate about explanation in the philosophies of history and the social sciences, and to an almost identical debate in moral psychology and the philosophy of mind. In so doing, I shall also examine a proposed distinction between *explaining* a phenomenon, and *rendering it intelligible*. I conclude by distinguishing between four different objects of historical understanding, each of which is to be understood in the light of the aforementioned distinctions between event and thing done, and explanation and intelligibility.

2. Two Debates about Covering Laws

Philosophers of history can be roughly divided into two camps with regard to explanation. The first *positivist* camp, commonly referred to as either *covering-law theorists* or (to use Quentin Skinner’s term) *social science naturalists* include Carl G. Hempel (1942), Patrick Gardiner (1952), John Passmore (1958), K. Popper (1959), Ernest Nagel (1960), Maurice Mandelbaum (1961), and even A.J. Ayer (1967). Social science naturalists maintain that historical explanation is a subset of scientific explanation and, consequently, relies upon causal laws (e.g. of socio-economy) from which we can deduce the occurrence (or the probability thereof) of historical events. Thus, for example, Hempel writes:

Consider, for example, the statement that the Dust Bowl farmers migrate to California ‘because’ continual drought and sandstorms render their existence increasingly precarious, and because California seems to them to offer so much better living conditions. This explanation rests on some such universal hypothesis as that populations will tend to migrate to regions which offer better living conditions.³

The opposing camp, which we might label the *anti-naturalists* includes Benedetto Croce (1921), R. G. Collingwood (1946), P.H. Nowell-Smith (1956), William Dray (1957 & 1963), Peter Winch (1958), Isaiah Berlin (1960), Wilhelm Dilthey (1961), Alan Donagan (1962), von Wright (1971), and Rüdiger Bittner (2001). *Anti-naturalists* argue that historical explanation does not involve any causal laws but rather the citing of reasons for which key figures in history - whose decisions have had a profound and direct influence on the course of history - acted as they did, reasons which, according to this second camp, need not be reducible to causes. William Dray, for example, writes:

The function of an explanation is to resolve puzzlement of some kind. When a historian sets out to explain a historical action, his problem is usually that he does not know what reason the agent had for doing it. To achieve understanding, what he seeks is information about what the agent believes to be the facts of his situation, including the likely results of taking various courses of action considered open to him, and what he wanted to accomplish...For explanations of the kind just illustrated, I should argue, the establishment of a deductive logical connection between *explanans* and *explanandum*, based on the inclusion of suitable empirical laws in the former, is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition of explaining.⁴

The second debate I have in mind is a debate in moral psychology (and the philosophy of mind on general) about whether or not reason-giving explanations of our actions rely upon causal laws. Tellingly, we can refer to participants this debate using labels borrowed from the aforementioned debate on historical explanation. Indeed a number of philosophers (e.g. Hempel, von Wright, and Bittner) appear in both. So what exactly does this second debate amount to?

First, there are those who think that *all* reason-giving explanation of our actions is a subset of scientific explanation and, consequently, relies upon causal laws. These *covering-law theorists* include C. J. Ducasse (1925), Carl G. Hempel (1962), Donald Davidson (1963 & 1976), Alvin I. Goldman (1969), Thomas Nagel (1970), Peter Railton (1978), Fred Dretske (1988), Al Mele (1992), Rowland Stout (1996), Jim Lenman (1996), Gregory Kimble (1996), and John Searle (2001). So, for example, Davidson writes:

I emphasized the role of *causality* in our understanding of action, urging that an appropriate belief and desire could explain, and be the reasons for, an action only if they caused it...There is a weak sense in which laws may be said to be involved which is not in dispute...if A causes B, there must be descriptions of A and B which show that A and B fall under a law.⁵

The opposing *anti-naturalist* camp denies this, maintaining that it is a sufficient condition of a reason-giving explanation of action that the reason cited renders the action intelligible. Chief proponents of this view include A.R. Louch (1966), Alan White (1967), D. G. Brown (1968), Norman Malcolm (1968), G. H. von Wright (1971), Arthur Collins (1997), Frederick Stoutland (1998), Jonathan Dancy (2000), and G. F. Schueler (2003). Thus, for example, Bittner writes that:

Reason explanations...explain an action by reference to an earlier state or event, which is the reason...A reason makes us understand something done for that reason not because there is a law to the effect that, given the state or event that is the reason, an agent produces action of this sort, for there may be no such law. A reason makes us understand

something done for a reason not because it informs us of the causal history of the action, since for all we know it may not do that. A reason makes us understand something done for that reason not because reason and action can be encoded in some story form, for perhaps they cannot: people's doing things for reasons need not come in preformed plots. It seems, then, that the explanatory force of reason explanations cannot be reduced to that of some other type of historical explanation. It seems that the explanatory force of reason explanations is just their own.⁶

We might do well to view the above debates (concerning historical explanation and reason-giving explanation) as part of an overarching question of whether or not social science (including history, anthropology, criminology, and economic and political theory) is a branch of natural science. It is to this larger question that I now turn.

3. The Conflating View of Action Explanation

Those who think that social science is a branch of natural science (e.g. Ducasse 1925, Hempel 1965, and Kuhn 1970) will likely side with the covering-law theorists in both debates outlined above, whereas those who deny that social science is a natural science (e.g. Winch 1958, Berlin 1974, Mahajan 1992) will more likely take the non-naturalist view of action explanation.⁷ Consider the following general claim by Ducasse:

Explanation essentially consists in the offering of a hypothesis of fact, standing to the fact to be explained as case of antecedent to case of consequent of some already known law of causation.⁸

This belief that *all* explanation is deductive-nomological (i.e. that 'a statement reporting the occurrence of the event being explained may be *deduced* from a statement describing the cause of the event together with a generalization backed by *causal laws*.') commits him the view that both historical and everyday reason-giving explanation of action *must* be deductive-nomological. Conversely, any philosopher who follows Peter Winch in claiming that no social behaviour whatsoever, no matter how conceived, is to be understood as being causally regulative (but only as 'rule-following' behaviour), is committed to the view that neither historical nor everyday reason-giving explanation of action could *ever* be deductive-nomological.

Charles Taylor has summed up this general division of outlooks on human behaviour in the following way:

It is often said that human behaviour...is in some way fundamentally different from the processes in nature which are studied by the natural sciences...Against this view stands the opinion of many others, in particular of many students of the sciences of human behaviour, that there is no difference in principle between the behaviour of animate organisms and any other processes in nature, that the former can be accounted for in the same way as the latter, by laws relating physical events...Now the issue between these two views is one of fundamental and perennial importance for what is often called philosophical anthropology, the study of the basic categories in which man and his behaviour is to be described and explained.⁹

My claim is that we should not attempt to resolve the issue in question by taking one of the two sides Taylor mentions above, for they both make the mistake of conflating the explanation of why an (event that was an) action *occurred* with the explanation of why one or more people *performed* a certain action, and in so doing subscribe to a *Conflating View of Action Explanation* (CVAE).

CVAE: Whatever explains why we act explains why our actions occur.

Yet it is far from obvious that in explaining why someone did something we will have also explained why the action which was their doing (of) that thing occurred. Since only the latter object of explanation concerns an event in the natural world, we might consistently (indeed, I shall argue, advisedly) hold that while explanations of why our actions occur *must* rely upon causal laws, explanations of why we do things (which are not concerned with events at all) cannot.

If I am right about this, then both covering-law theorists and anti-naturalists are wrong to maintain of *everything* that might reasonably count as an explanation of action either that it either must or that it cannot rely on causal laws. This is not to say that there might be no either/or regarding any *specific* object of explanation, but only that our answer will depend on what the nature of the particular object in question.

Many an anti-naturalist has argued against covering-law theorists that they:

Are forced into a mistaken view of their subject-matter as a result of their preoccupation with a method they take to be necessary to any respectable enquiry.¹⁰

I shall try to show that this is true. But I shall also argue that a covering-law theorist might complain, with equal right, that anti-naturalists have been forced into a mistaken view of *their* subject matter as a result of a preoccupation with a method which they (equally mistakenly) take to be necessary to *any* enquiry regarding human affairs.

4. Explanation and Intelligibility

The claim that there is more to explaining than ‘merely’ rendering intelligible is based on the idea that once an action has been rendered intelligible we will have understood why someone *would* or *might* do it, but not why they *actually* did it. The thought here is that the reasons any given agent might have for acting could easily render any number of possible actions *intelligible* (i.e. for any set of considerations which we might state, a number of equally intelligible courses of action may be available to her), but they could hardly *explain* them all. Explanation, it is claimed, can only be achieved if we can show that the action occurred *because* the agent had this reason or that (where the ‘because’ is typically understood causally). Writing specifically about historical explanation, John Passmore makes such a move:

[E]xplanation by reference to a “principle of action” or a “good reason” is not, by itself, explanation at all...For a reason may be a “good reason” - in a sense of being a principle to which one could appeal in justification of one’s action - without having in fact the slightest influence on us.¹¹

Similarly, in a paper whose main target is William Dray’s contention that the popular method of

explaining actions in terms of underlying reasons which agents act in the light of cannot be construed as conforming to the covering-law pattern, Hempel writes that:

[T]o show that an action was the appropriate or rational thing to have done under the circumstances is not to explain why in fact it was done...[T]he presentation of an action as being appropriate to a given situation, as making sense, cannot, for purely logical reasons, serve to explain why in fact the action was taken.¹²

Such arguments *appear* compelling since, assuming that the aforementioned distinction between intelligibility and explanation stands (and it certainly has some intuitive plausibility), our citing the reasons for which the agent acted would not amount to an explanation of her action unless we added (if only by implication) that those reasons *moved* or *motivated* her to act. Thus, reasons must be identified with *causes*, the argument continues, on pain of not being able to explain action.

An influential expression of such an argument appears in Thomas Nagel's *The View from Nowhere*:

Everything that I *do* or that anyone else *does* is part of a larger course of *events* that no one "does," but that happens, with or without explanation...*There is no room in an objective picture of the world for an explanation of action that is not causal...The alternative form of explanation doesn't really explain the action at all...* When someone makes an autonomous choice such as whether to accept a job, and there are reasons on both sides of the issue, we are supposed to be able to explain why he did what he did by pointing to his reasons for accepting it. But we could equally have explained his refusing the job, if he had refused, by referring to the reasons on the other side – and he could have refused for those other reasons: that is the essential claim of autonomy. It applies even if one choice is significantly more reasonable than the other. Bad reasons are reasons too.

Intentional explanation, if there is such a thing, can explain either choice in terms of the appropriate reasons, since either choice would be intelligible if it occurred. But for this very reason it cannot explain why this person accepted the job for the reasons in favor instead of refusing it for the reasons against. *It cannot explain on grounds of intelligibility why one of two intelligible courses of action, both of which were possible, occurred.* And even where it can account for this in terms of further reasons, there will be a point at which the explanation gives out. We say that someone's character and values are revealed by the choices he makes in such circumstances, but if these are indeed independent conditions, they too must either have or lack an explanation.

If autonomy requires that the central element of choice be explained in a way that does not take us outside the point of view of the agent (leaving aside the explanation of what faces him with the choice), then intentional explanations must simply come to an end when all available reasons have been given, and nothing else can take over where they leave off. But this seems to mean that an autonomous intentional explanation cannot explain precisely what it is supposed to explain, namely *why I did what I did rather than the alternative that was causally open to me.* It says I did it for certain reasons, but does not explain why I didn't decide not to do it for other reasons. *It may render the action subjectively intelligible, but it does not explain why this rather than another equally*

*possible and comparably intelligible action was done. That seems to be something for which there is no explanation, either intentional or causal.*¹³

There are (at the very least) five distinct objects of explanation which Nagel seems to be conflating here: (1) why I did something (2) why my action (of doing it) occurred (3) why I did something for reason *x* rather than omit to do it (for reason *y*) (4) why I did something for reason *x* rather than something else (for reason *x* or *y*) (5) why I did something rather than something else (irrespective of any agential reasons).

Yet surely one can explain the first (why I did something) without explaining the second, third, fourth, or fifth. Suppose, for example, that I stay home for the reason that there will be too many people that I don't know at the party I have been invited to. Remaining neutral, for the moment, as to whether or not the above statement provides an explanation of why I stayed home, what is certain is that it does not explain why I stayed at home instead of going to the cinema instead. For an explanation of *this* we might add that I was tired, do not like the cinema, that nothing I wished to see was playing etc. Likewise, to explain why I did not go to the party *for the reason* that there were many people there that I didn't know, we must add a further reason e.g. that I am shy and/or have barely enough time for my close friends and relatives (after all if I had a different character, or was in a different situation, I might have gone to the party precisely because there were many people there that I didn't know). This further reason need not (though it could) be an *agential reason* in the sense that it need not be a reason that I acted *for* or *upon* (indeed it need not even be something I am aware of), but only something which explains, perhaps causally, why the reason I did act upon had that kind of influence on me (and, depending on the example, perhaps also why some other reason didn't have a stronger pull towards some other direction). For any given situation, there are numerous objects of action explanation, and no reason to expect that they must all share the same *explanans* (or even the same *type* of *explanans*). What Nagel calls an 'intentional explanation' (an explanation in terms of what I have called 'agential reasons') will only suit certain kinds of objects of action explanation, but it would be a mistake to infer from the fact that it cannot explain them *all* that it cannot explain *any* of them. Yet in conflating (1)-(5), this is exactly what Nagel has done. In so doing, he appears to accept both of the following:

CVAE: Whatever explains why we act explains why our actions occur.

CVR: The reasons for which we act are reasons why our actions occur.

Focusing on occurrences for a moment, we might also add that it is one thing to explain why an event (say, an action) occurred, and quite another to explain why it occurred *rather than* some other event. In the first instance, it might be sufficient to show why the occurrence was *probable*, in the latter we would need to show that it was *more probable* than the competing alternative, and one can imagine an scenario where what needs to be shown is that the occurrence was *inevitable*. In each case, however, our object of explanation will be different. Under no circumstance, however, would the fact that one has not shown the occurrence of any given action (say that of my staying at home) to be inevitable suggest that one must have therefore failed to explain why anybody acted as they did (e.g. why I stayed at home instead of going to the party). Returning to the arguments offered by Passmore and Hempel above, we can now see that they falsely assume that one cannot explain why an action was performed unless one has shown that it (by which they mean its occurrence) was inevitable. But we have now seen that such requirements on explanation are at best misguided.

Considerations which render actions intelligible typically lead to an understanding of why the agent *might have* acted as she did. But if we also happen to know that these considerations were indeed the ones the agent acted upon we will have also understood why she *actually* acted as she did. As Stephen Toulmin once noted in a different context:

If you protest that I must have some explanation (still meaning a ‘scientific’ one), that is your mistake; for there are some situations in which the demand for a scientific explanation is out of place.¹⁴

Once we appreciate that such difficulties arise only because of the various aforementioned confluences, we come to see that there is no unbridgeable gap between rendering a person’s action intelligible, and explaining why it was performed, though we might wish to say that, strictly speaking, what explains why A did X is not her reason for performing the action *tout court* but a statement which *specifies* her reason for performing the action. To the extent that the study of history (or for that matter anthropology, criminology, and economic and political theory) is interested in *such* questions, they cannot hope to offer scientific explanations. But, of course, history (and social science in general) is just as often interested in other objects of action explanation, including many which may call for radically different methodologies, some more scientific than others. The explanation of a particular trend or tendency, for example, or the occurrence of a historical event such as the collapse of a nation’s stock market and the depression that ensued may well be deductive-nomological (I take it that ‘*verstehende erklaerung*’ - Weber’s ‘ideal type’ interpretive causal explanations - would also fall into this category).

In his influential book *Theory of Action* Lawrence Davis writes:

While the explanation of Sam’s action aims at displaying the action’s intelligibility... explanation of... a “mere” event, aims at displaying its *inevitability*. Reasons-explanations and causal-explanations differ, then, in their aims and the battery of concepts that apply to them.¹⁵

There is much truth to this remark, though in order to get to it we must restrict the object of action explanation to ‘why Sam did what he did’ and not ‘why Sam’s action occurred’ (Davis’s use of the term ‘mere’ betrays the fact that he is conflating the two, by suggesting that reasons-explanations are also explanations of events). For while we may do things for reasons (that help explain our actions by rendering them intelligible), the events which are our actions (of doing these things) are neither things we do, nor things that occur *for* reasons. As for the purported difference between reasons-explanations and causal-explanations, this difference is real only if we take reasons-explanations to be explanations which give our reasons *for* acting. But a reasons-explanation of action could equally reasonably be conceived of as an explanation in terms of non-agential reasons which explain why an action was performed, or even why an event that happens to be an action occurred. If our object of explanation is of the first type, we will be first and foremost interested in psychological intelligibility; if it is of the second, our enquiry is more likely to concern itself with questions of probability and inevitability.

5. Four Objects of Historical Understanding

I wish to end by suggesting that we ought to distinguish between (at least) four different sets of

objects of historical understanding¹⁶:

- 1) Rendering a historical event *intelligible* leads to an understanding of (i.e. explains) why/how/when/where it *might* have occurred.
- 2) *Explaining* a historical event leads to an understanding of (i.e. explains) why/how/when/where it *did* occur.
- 3) Rendering it *intelligible* why/how/when/where a person performed an action (of historical significance) leads to an understanding of (i.e. explains) why/how/when/where she *might* have done what she did.
- 4) *Explaining* why/how/when/where a person performed an action (of historical significance) leads to an understanding of (i.e. explains) why she actually did what she did.

To insist that the explanation of action in history either *must* be or *cannot* be deductive-nomological is to lose sight of one or more of these.

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Notes

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2. I actually follow Achinstein (1975) in thinking that the number of objects of action explanation is legion since for any given action (even under a specific description) we can ask an endless string of questions relating to where, how, why, and when, each of which is seeking an explanation of something different e.g. ‘when did the event of her walking occur?’, ‘why did she walk so slowly?’, ‘where did she walk to?’, ‘why did she walk rather than run?’, ‘how did she walk so far?’, ‘why she walk this way rather than that’, etc. Further below I look at a passage where Thomas Nagel conflates at least five such different objects.
3. Hempel 1942: para 5.2.
4. Dray 1962: 68-70.
5. Davidson 1976: 262.
6. Bittner 2001: 88-9.

7. This is not to say that there are no exceptions. Popper, for example, defends the hypothetico-deductive model of historical explanation while rejecting (for a variety of reasons including the denial of determinism) the more general thesis that social science can be modelled on the natural sciences (Popper 1957: section 15). Similarly, Davidson also defends the hypothetico-deductive model of reason-giving explanation of action, but denies that there are any bridging laws linking psychological propositions to natural ones (1970 & 1976: 262).
8. Ducasse: 1925: 150ff.
9. Taylor 1964: 3.
10. Louch 1966:5.
11. Passmore 1958:275, emphasis in the original.
12. Hempel 1963: 102 & 105.
13. Nagel 1986: 114-7, the emphasis is mine. In a footnote, Nagel adds that ‘Lucas notices this but is not, I think, sufficiently discouraged by it: “There remains a tension between the programme of complete explicability and the requirements of freedom. If men have free will, then no complete explanation of their actions can be given, except by reference to themselves. We can give their reasons. But we cannot explain why their reasons were reasons for them...Asked why I acted, I give my reasons: asked why I chose to accept them as reasons, I can only say ‘I just did’” [Lucas 1970: 171-2].
14. Toulmin 1964: 96.
15. Davis 1979: 85.
16. I use the term ‘understanding’ ordinarily, and not in the Weberian sense in which ‘Verstehen’ is (at least preliminarily) contrasted with ‘Erklären’.

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