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Explanations without causes and causes without reasons

Abstract. *Action is a central category in the social sciences. It is also commonplace to assume that the social world has a causal structure. Yet standard ways of specifying causal relations in social science lack explanatory force when the subject matter is intentional action. The present article considers this problem. The metaphysics of action are distinguished from the metaphysics of intentional action, and it is argued that the former forces an implausible unity on the actions of inanimate nature and of rational agents. Agency in the metaphysics of action adds nothing to state-variable causation. Agency in the metaphysics of intentional action, in contrast, is argued to have a different structure, not reducible to state-variable causation. Work on endogenous choice in social science suggests that the concept of agency that is on view in literature on selection effects and social generation implies the metaphysics of intentional action. Recent research in the philosophy of action is considered in order to specify the structure of intentional action and the force of intentional explanations.*

Key words. *Agency – Causation – Endogenous choice – Intentional action – Intentional explanations – Philosophy of action – Reasons-explanations – Selection effects*

Résumé. *L'action est une catégorie centrale en sciences sociales. De même on a coutume d'admettre que le monde social a une structure causale. Pourtant les spécifications usuelles des relations causales en science sociale manquent de force explicative lorsqu'il s'agit de l'action intentionnelle. C'est à cela que s'intéresse cet article. La métaphysique de l'action y est distinguée de la métaphysique de l'action intentionnelle, et l'auteur soutient que la première impose une unité peu plausible aux actions de la nature inanimée et à celles des agents rationnels. L'action en métaphysique de l'action n'ajoute rien à la causalité des variables d'état. L'action en métaphysique de l'action intentionnelle, au contraire, est*

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présentée comme ayant une structure différente, qui ne peut être réduite à la causalité des variables d'état. Les travaux sur le choix endogène en science sociale suggèrent que le concept d'action que donne à voir la littérature sur les effets de sélection et la production sociale implique la métaphysique de l'action intentionnelle. Les recherches récentes en philosophie de l'action sont prises en compte pour spécifier la structure de l'action intentionnelle et la force des explications intentionnelles.

Mots-clés. *Action – Action intentionnelle – Causalité – Choix endogène – Effets de sélection – Explications intentionnelles – Philosophie de l'action – Raisons-explications*

This article examines the place of 'explanations without causes' in the social sciences. Do such explanations exist? What is their structure? And what is their import? By 'explanations without causes', I have in mind intentional explanations and reasons-explanations. For some time, it has been assumed that these are causal explanations. In separating cause and explanation, I am proposing that these are explanations which are not causal. This proposal is made about something fairly fundamental to the human and social sciences: human action.[1]

In order to discuss the relationship of explanation and causation when the subject matter is action, the article examines recent work in the philosophy of action. This discussion is initially framed in light of the work of Donald Davidson, since his arguments about the structure of intentional action have been influential. His work, however, has also been challenged in productive ways. The challenges raise the possibility that reasons-explanations do explain, but are not causal. Indeed, a different part of Davidson's work, not directly bearing on causes and reasons, opens up this possibility. That said, however, his work is an entry point rather than the main focus; we are concerned here with the connection between action theory – the philosophy of action – and problems of explanation in the social and human sciences.

The most general form of explanation relative to humans is the intentional explanation which includes reasons in the explanation of action. While there is a longstanding argument that these kinds of explanations are causal, an argument which often turns to some of the work of Donald Davidson, there is other work that treats these kinds of explanations as explanations without causes, that is as non-causal explanations. This is the debate that is taken up here. It is the implications of the literature in the philosophy of action for empirical social science which motivate the discussion, in light of the self-image of social science as a science which, in solving problems of causal inference, produces causal explanations of social phenomena.

Intentional explanations relate to humans, and what they explain – action – has an intentional structure that is calculative in form. This is to say, as will be argued in more detail below, that an intentional explanation provides explanation without depending on a causal relation or mechanism. Something should be said immediately about the way in which 'causal relation' is being used here, by way of qualification. I do not have to rule out *all* kinds of causal relations in making this argument about intentional explanation. What must be ruled out is the kind of causal relation that is central to empirical social science. Intentional explanations thus will be distinguished from causal explanation rooted in associations, conjunction or regularity, and from causal explanations based on the identification of mechanisms. And one other note should be registered: I have made reference to intentional explanations and reasons-explanations because there are at least two separate questions about intentional action. One is the relation between intention and action. The other is the relation between reasons and intentional action. The discussion in this article bears on both questions.

Intentional explanations, causal mechanisms and methodological monism

There is some continuity between the work on mechanisms and the deductive-nomological model of explanation. From its origins, and particularly as developed by Hempel (1942, 1965, 1966), this has been a model that explicitly assimilated explanation in the human sciences to explanation in the natural sciences. It is an expression of 'methodological monism' and a commitment to the unity of scientific method (von Wright, [1971] 2004: 4). The modifications to this model introduced via mechanisms are significant but they are still limited. They leave largely intact a methodology that is rooted in comparison and generalization in the search for external causes: No explanation without comparison and generalization (Norkus, 2005: 372) and no explanation that is not causal.[2] This is the core of quasi-experimental method in social research from whence spring all of the methodological vices, from selection bias to omitted variables to conceptual stretching.

In this article, however, the arguments adduced in support of the turn to mechanisms do not motivate the interest in intentional explanations. Intentional explanations do not matter because of their status as a kind of middle-ground between the nomothetic and the ideographic, or as a substitute for covering-law models of explanation, although this is one influential justification for the introduction of mechanisms (Norkus, 2005; Elster, 1993). Nor are intentional explanations important because they contribute to

solutions to the 'small N' problem of case-study-oriented qualitative research, which has been another important justification for the turn to mechanisms in comparative social research (Mahoney, 2000, 2003: 363–5; Bennett & George, 2004). More generally, the interest in this kind of explanation is not motivated by the metaphor of the 'black box' which must be opened up and specified before a satisfactory causal explanation is achieved.

Intentional explanations may look like a thin wedge but they raise important issues. Monism has depended on the denial of difference between the natural and the social with regard to explanation. Yet if intentions do not cause actions, and reasons cannot be assimilated to efficient causes, then there can be explanations without comparison or generalization. Methodological monism will have been violated pretty much at its heart. Here, the interest in intentional explanations is motivated by the thought that attention to them introduces a critical perspective on causes that is not internal to statistical, covering-law or mechanistic models of explanation.

The conversion of an association into an explanation in the social sciences increasingly has come to rest on the specification of causal mechanisms (Hedström & Swedberg, 1998). It would be a mistake, however, to think of intentional explanations as resting on causal mechanisms.

Some important work in statistical, variable-centered traditions is rather skeptical of mechanisms, because mechanisms must themselves be explained (and explained causally). This response questions the distinctive contribution of mechanisms to causal explanation. The point of this skepticism is to force the issue: How much distance is there between the statistical point of view and the introduction of mechanisms? The skeptics are right to press here.

Statistical arguments are by their nature associationist. They are driven by empirical regularity. The point of introducing mechanisms is to argue that association is not enough in explanation, which is potentially a modification to associationism. But the modifications are limited, and the skeptics are right to note this feature. The introduction of mechanisms continues to be faithful to the overriding commitment to causal explanation and inference.

However, there is another feature of the turn to mechanisms which now must be recognized. Mechanisms and micro-foundations tend to have been tied together. Mechanisms have become important as part of an interest in specifying micro-foundations. The justification has been not simply that more than associations are needed in causal explanation (which motivates the interest in social mechanisms) but that we need more than associations and regularities among macro-level phenomena (which motivates an interest in micro-foundations).

This move introduces agency. When mechanisms are joined in this way to micro-foundations, what is introduced is something which might be disconnected from association altogether. Agency is a much more direct challenge to

variable-centered social science than are mechanisms. Hedström & Swedberg make this disconnection explicit: actors, and not variables, do the acting (Hedström & Swedberg, 1998: 24, drawing on Abbott, 1992). Humans stand in a different kind of relation to action than one variable stands in relation to other variables. This much is implied by Hedström & Swedberg. However, what they do not provide is an argument which shows why or how the former relation can continue to be a causal relation if it is fundamentally different from the relations which connect variables. The argument of this article is that this position is mistaken. What will be proposed is a more complete separation of cause and explanation when the subject matter is intentional action.

Are agents causes?

It is not difficult to think of agents or actors as causes in the sense that agents bring things about. This is the sense in which actors and their acts are connected in the discussion above. However, if causation is a relation between events or states, and this is a standard way to understand a causal relation,[3] then agents cannot be causes, because agents are neither events nor states (Alvarez, 2005: 53).[4]

There is another view of agent causation that depends on 'substance causation', which could be invoked here, but it too has difficulties.[5] This position would have the consequence of accepting the existence of inanimate agents: '[T]he possession and exercise of the power to make something happen – such as to make a lump of zinc dissolve – is sufficient to make the volume of acid an agent' (Alvarez & Hyman, 1998: 245). And this is an analogy that is often made explicitly: Actors are like chemical agents in a chemical reaction. If to act is to exercise a causal power, this also seems to further imply that action is a term which can be extended to inanimate nature, an implication which makes this view implausible. Inanimate agents cannot have reasons; rational agents can and do. The further problem is that agent-causation does not distinguish between (a) causing something to happen which was not intended and (b) bringing about something which was intended.[6] In other words, agent-causation is defective for our purposes, unless we want to claim that our interest in action is not an interest in *intentional* action. Agent-causation does not provide a coherent way to connect 'actors' and 'acting' unless action is a term we are willing to extend to inanimate nature. The introduction of agency thus forces a choice in a way that the introduction of mechanisms does not. If agents are causes, the action in question is not intentional; but then we are left contemplating the ways in which the action of an acid and the action of a human being are the same.

Intentional action is not action with something extra (intentionality) added. The metaphysics of intentional action are different in kind from the metaphysics of action. Those features which are essential to intentional action are features that intentional action has necessarily. And the necessity in question is not simply conceptual necessity. Intentional action is not an optional concept. It is more like an elementary form or structure of human life.

This issue is not taken further here. But the necessity in question can be thought out in several possible ways. An evolutionary interpretation of the origins of the intentional stance would emphasize a kind of brute necessity (Dennett, 1987). The centrality of teleological dispositions to our self-understandings might be understood in relation to a particular culture (Lear, 2000). The necessity in play here would be a weaker kind of necessity. It might be termed cultural necessity. In between these two possibilities lie other forms of social necessity which might link intentional action to human life. Could we do for intentional action what Williams (2001) did for the virtues of sincerity and accuracy or what Durkheim ([1912] 1968) did for the sacred? Their approaches are different. Part of Durkheim's argument, for example, was that the function of the sacred was discovered empirically, but, in each of these cases, there is a claim that something is socially necessary because of its use – its contribution to the reproduction of human cooperation.[7] Another treatment can be found in Thompson (2008) where necessity does not turn on usefulness.

If the action of interest in the social sciences is intentional action, then actors are not causes. We could look for causes elsewhere but this is in effect to admit the problem. We might even invoke sub-agent states in the search for causes. There is, for example, a longstanding argument that belief–desire pairs cause action. But these pairs are variable states. If they explain action directly, there is no need to consider agency (Hornsby, 2004). There is *nothing* in state-variables which rules out *your* beliefs and desires causing *my* actions.

Indeed this kind of relation should be at the heart of the metaphysics of action. This relation should be its centerpiece. If it can be made intelligible and shown to be necessary for the generation of the social world, then the metaphysics of action is superior to the metaphysics of intentional action. We would be able to do away with agency altogether, since agency in action would simply have become a euphemism for state-variable causation, adding nothing to the latter. However, it is inconvenient for the metaphysics of action that the social world is individuated into intentional communities and intentional agents who cannot yet be decomposed into collections of

state-variables. These are different kinds of entities than state-variables. They are treated as cases in the relevant methodological literature, although the distinction between cases and variables does not really reveal what is at stake.

We should now look at some related issues before moving on to a discussion of the structure of intentional action. First of all we need to consider whether conditions (understood in a particular but not idiosyncratic way) can cause intentional action. Thereafter the problems of selection and selection effects in the generation of the social world are taken up.

Brute facts and institutional facts: do conditions cause action?[8]

Causality has been treated in relation to conditions – essentially asking whether conditions are sufficient and/or necessary. This treatment has been given new life in recent arguments in comparative social research (Baumoeller & Goertz, 2000; Goertz & Starr, 2003; Mahoney, 2007). In particular, comparative research which is oriented toward macro-level analysis, specifically structural and institutional arguments, has been drawn to this position. The attractiveness of this position lies in the sense in which something – a condition – can be taken as given or fixed (i.e. 'present').[9] And when this condition is present, effects follow.

The fundamental question is: What gives conditions explanatory force in explaining action? Either explanatory force depends on causes or it does not. In comparative social research, explanatory force is quite clearly supposed to depend on causal relations. But the problem in this position lies in specifying how a condition causes anything with regard to action.[10] How does a condition do this causing and hence explaining? Exactly the same problem associated with agent-causation arises here: All that conditions, so understood, could explain is action rather than *intentional* action. A condition here is much like an agent: it makes things happen; but what a condition cannot cause is just what an agent cannot cause: *intentional* action. Structural and institutional explanations do have a way out of this impasse, but it reveals the problem and does not resolve it. The counterfactuals of structural and institutional explanations imply premises which implicate intentions, and these kinds of explanations trade continually on this implication without taking on board what intentional action entails.[11]

This literature is ambiguous about 'conditions' – ambiguous between conditions treated as brute facts and conditions treated as institutional facts.[12] However, brute facts and institutional facts are 'given' in very different ways.[13] This literature assumes that institutional facts stand in the same

relation to causal relations as do brute facts, or assumes that they can be treated as if they did. But, then, this literature in comparative social research must be able to establish explanatory force with reference only to causal relations and processes and, typically, this literature finesses the issue by depending on the explanatory force of intentions.

Problems of selection and endogeneity in the explanation of action

Much of the foundational work on statistical analysis and research design – such as the work of Fisher (1926) and Wright (1921) – has its origins in the study of plant genetics in agricultural field stations. The first application of path analysis was to the birth weight of guinea pigs and the transpiration of plants. Fisher's work involved the application of nitrogenous manure and its effects on yields of winter oats. The exogenous selection in play here is rooted in nature and the mechanism of natural selection. Nature solves, so to speak, its own selection problem.

One other way, then, to point to the contrast with the animate world in which reason is present is to ask: Why is there a problem of self-selection when we are dealing with persons? 'Plots of ground do not respond to anticipated treatments of fertilizer, nor can they excuse themselves from being treated' (Heckman, 1992: 215; 1997).[14] Self-selection renders moot the standard variable-driven way of dealing with problems of identification and endogeneity via the use of instrumental variables. The latter are designed for problems of selection in nature and they fail in the face of self-selection. They are designed for data that is not generated by intentional action, where the process of data generation is a physical process; they are ill adapted to social situations. And, moreover, the problem of self-selection is pervasive, since self-selection is closely connected to – is a result of – intentional action.

This discussion has further implications for the question of how the social world is generated, which, typically in empirical social science, is taken to be a causal process. The argument in this paper is partially consistent with one important treatment in the social sciences of this issue. There are two parts to this treatment: (1) the social world is non-randomly generated; and (2) the social world is generated relative to ends. The first part means that the similarities and differences among cases which motivate quasi-experimental research design in comparative social research are not random variables. I take the second part to mean that the differences and similarities of interest to us cannot be explained by efficient causes.

The social world is endogenously and non-randomly generated. Przeworski makes this argument in order to point to the difficulty of matching cases in comparative research. The Przeworski of Przeworski & Teune ([1970] 2001) treated social generation in relation to exogenous variables; in a subsequent argument the social world is endogenous to action and choice and, more specifically, to the relationships between means and ends. 'The conditions under which we live are somehow created by people in pursuit of their ends …We thus must treat the observable world as having been produced by "us", that is, as having been generated endogenously' (Przeworski, 1995). Przeworski, however, does not then argue that this process of generation is at its heart non-causal, which is what would be implied by my treatment of the internal calculative or deliberative relation of means and ends in this article.[15]

His position modified an earlier argument: If the natural order is a causal order, then the social world is natural because it too has a causal structure; what distinguishes the natural and the social is that the causal structure of the natural world is given, the causal structure of society is not (Przeworski & Sprague, 1986: 7). This appears to be an argument which is not quite complete. It prompts the question: Why is the structure of the social world not given while the structure of the natural world is? The later argument – that the social world is endogenously generated relative to ends – does help to complete the argument and answer the question. The question is answered, but another is simultaneously raised: How, in fact, can a social structure (which, recall, is not given in the nature of things) be causally generated when generation is relative to ends?[16]

The perspective on agency and intentional action introduced to this point also works to rule out a treatment of causation (Holland, 1986; Woodward, 2003) which emphasizes the relationship between causation and manipulation by invoking a primitive concept of agency. This is a theory of causality which claims to be applicable both to human action and to physical processes in a hypothetical world in which human beings do not exist. The analogy to experimental manipulation is quite deliberate in this literature, but the manipulation of variables is neither the point of intentional action nor essential to intentional action. This line of argument illustrates a point made earlier: In the metaphysics of action, agency is a euphemism for causation and adds nothing to the latter.

The argument is that 'it is heuristically useful to think of explanatory and causal relationships as relations that are potentially exploitable for purposes of manipulation and control'. Nevertheless, this is merely a heuristic and preliminary device. As it stands, according to Woodward, this intuition is too anthropocentric and subjectivist. Moreover, there are 'circumstances in

which manipulation by humans is not possible' and 'these will be circumstances in which the relevant experience of agency is unavailable' (Woodward, 2003: 123; cf. Holland, 1986). The goal is the construction of a theory of causality which, once the heuristic device has done its preliminary work, specifies that interventions are '*hypothetical* interventions on X, of what would happen to Y under such interventions, and hence of X causing Y, even if manipulation of X is not within the technological abilities of human beings, and indeed even in circumstances in which human beings or other agents do not exist' (Woodward, 2003: 128, emphasis added). This line of argument is unavailable if, as is argued here, the process generating the social world is endogenous to intentional action. It is odd to contemplate a theory of causality which claims to be applicable to human action and, at the same time, applicable in a hypothetical world in which human beings do not exist. Still, it would be a mistake to assume that human life is not part of the natural world. Nothing like this assumption is made here.

Function, purpose and the intentional stance

Intentional explanation is a form of explanation which reduces neither to causal explanation nor to functional explanation. Reasons are relative to persons, and, in contrast, the central mechanism in functional explanation – natural selection – is explicitly not relative to persons. Notably, this is the feature which makes natural selection mechanical. 'Since natural selection is purely mechanical, this means that functional explanations require no references to persons (or to God)' (Schueler, 2003: 23).[17] This position establishes a fairly strict separation between purpose and function.[18]

Evolutionary theory has a difficult time dealing with intentions, and with propositional attitudes generally. Its theorists want to assimilate them to the mechanistic core of evolutionary theory. Evolutionary theory is hostile to intelligent design; action, which is designed and intelligent, is a problem for evolutionary theorists. They are reluctant to leave intentions free standing. Dennett (1971, 1987) argued that animals that adopt the 'intentional stance' are drawing on an evolved response to a hostile environment and are expressing an innate urge. More generally, they look for means to naturalize humans in ways compatible with natural selection: make the mind equivalent to the informational functions of the brain (Pinker, 1997), make the mind identical to the physical brain so that all humans have the same minds (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999), convert 'folk psychology' into physical brain-states (Churchland, 1981, 1986).[19]

Does the argument of this article then entail a commitment to the position that persons are not animals? It does not. Hornsby, for example, concedes that there are intentional systems which are not persons and which can be viewed from a third-person, impersonal stance, but she then goes on to argue that persons are not things that can be treated as intentional systems – that is, from a third-person viewpoint (Hornsby, 1997a: 178–84; cf. Schueler, 2003: 160–3).

This interest in some form of reconciliation might motivate and justify a search for a form of naturalism which is not physicalist (Hornsby, 1997b). However, the evolutionary interpretation of intentional action is too one-sided. It is not just that intentional action must be consistent with natural selection; natural selection must be consistent with intentional action. Further, naturalizing humans will not have some of the consequences often assumed. It is not the case, for example, that this entails that their nervous systems process information in the computationalist sense rather than create meaning (Petitot et al., 1999; Thompson, 2007: 13ff.; see also Bennett & Hacker, 2003; Bennett et al., 2007), or that the human mind is *literally* a computational system (Pinker, 2007: 259; emphasis added).

The structure of action and practical teleology

Intentional action has a structure which is not adequately recognized in work on causality, even that literature on mechanisms which is designed to open up the 'black box'.

First of all, action is intentional; not to impose this qualification would be to admit involuntary behaviors and gestures. This closes any gap between act and intention, but there might well be exceptions. The potential gap between act and intention, such that a voluntary act is not intended, is philosophically interesting, for example, in normative ethical theory (Harris, 2000; Kamm, 2000). Although the ethical interest in the conditions of permissible harm to others is rather removed from my interest in forms of explanation in the social and human sciences, there is a perspective on teleology in this literature which should be noted. The contrast here seems to be between differing moral intuitions – deontological and teleological.

These different intuitions can be linked to different general forms of action statements. Given some end X and a means Z, the contrast is between (i) A does Z 'in order *that*' X come about, and (ii) A does Z 'in order *to*' bring about X. The importance of (i) is that it shows that A need not do Z for the purpose of bringing X about; A need not intend Z (Kamm, 2004: 18; original

emphasis). This distinction, via (i), then provides a non-teleological form of action statements for deontological moral intuitions. A deontological defense of the limits of permissible harm, including prescriptions and prohibitions about how to act morally in stylized cases, thus can be produced. To seek to give a form to deontological moral intuitions in this way is to suggest that a model of purposive action does not and cannot match the deep structure of human morality – our most basic moral intuitions.[20]

Independent of the ethical interest in permissible harm, which is not the focus of this article, there is no demonstration in this literature that a strictly deontological account of action in fact can be complete. My most basic intuition (if an intuition is what it is), moral or otherwise, is that I cannot make sense of *human life* without putting practical teleology[21] at the center of an account of human life.

The aim here is not to defend an argument that teleology is all there is to an account of human life, however, but, rather, to give practical teleology its full measure, in part because many non-teleological forms of explanation in the social sciences trade on the force of intentional explanations which have a teleological form.

Second, action which is intentional under one description need not be intentional under another description (Anscombe, 1957; Vogler, 2002: 61).

Third, non-causal intentional explanations place action in intensional contexts – the indirect contexts of propositional attitudes. In contrast, Davidson placed action in an extensional context so that he could talk of the same act under different descriptions (Davidson, [1963] 2001a, 1966, 1967; cf. Churchland, 1970). The first argument emphasizes sense, the second emphasizes reference.[22]

The argument provided in Stine, when she defends the 'indirectness' of propositional attitudes, does not take up the issue of whether the objects of intentions are propositions (if they are not, then intentions are not propositional attitudes). It may be the case that an intention is not propositional in the same way as a standard belief. However, there is a tradition that does take these objects of intention to have a kind of propositional content, designated as 'accomplishments' or 'performances' (Thompson, 2008: 123). In reworking this tradition, Thompson eliminates talk of indirect contexts and the 'carving off' of intension from extension in the analysis of intentional action but, in so proceeding, introduces another distinction between different *aspects* of intentional action (2008: 137, 123). This distinction finds a particular application in connection to rational life and agency (p. 131), which preserves the distinctiveness of the 'in order to' action form. This is to say that it is possible to defend the centrality of this action form – the 'in order to' form – without treating 'intending' as having the structure of a propositional attitude.[23]

Fourth, intentional action is structured by the relation of means to ends. This relationship is formal and thus general: nothing is said about the substantive contents of particular ends or means.[24]

Fifth, the central relation is calculative so that 'any ordinary intentional action is a candidate for calculative reasons explanations' (Vogler, 2002: 151; cf. Schueler, 2003).

Sixth, the reason-explanation takes the general 'in order to' form rather than the 'because of' form (Schutz, 1951; Vogler, 2002: 143, 169; Schueler, 2003; Setiya, 2007: 51–2).[25] Reasons-explanations require that the 'because of' form can be given an 'in order to' construction.[26]

Seventh, the structure of intentional action is not reduced to psychological antecedents. Intentionality is not something behind, so to speak, or outside action (von Wright, [1971] 2004: 115).

Further, the purposive structure of action, as set out here, does not depend on, or underwrite, a distinction between communicative and strategic action nor does this treatment take the further step of arguing that communicative action is the original mode of language use. Habermas, who has made the strongest case for both of these positions, argued that reaching understanding through communicative action is a peculiar 'goal', because understanding cannot be pursued (via communication) in the same way as a goal can be pursued through teleological action (Habermas, 1982: 265; 1990: 58).[27] This is a position that Habermas attempted to make good by drawing on Austin's ([1962] 1975) distinction between illocutionary and perlocutionary speech acts. One problem with this claim is that illocutionary acts can be strategic (in Habermas' sense) and continue to fulfill the constitutive conditions of an illocution. In my treatment here, action is teleological and the purposive structure of action is not a causal structure just because that structure is teleological.

Finally, by way of summary of the above features and as Weber recognized, the dualism of ends and means does not map onto the dualism of cause and effect.[28] In the next section, I take forward this discussion of the structure of action through a discussion of Davidson's 'anomalous monism' and the problem of identifying the explanatory force of reasons-explanations.

Action and explanatory force

Davidson points out how his account differs from Hempel's general treatment of scientific explanation, precisely because Davidson's account emphasizes the role of causality: Belief and desire can explain an action only if they caused it (Davidson, [1976] 2001b: 262). Nonetheless there is a

version of monism in Davidson's work (Davidson, 1970, 1995). Davidson's innovation is to present an argument for physicalism which depends on a nomological thesis about causation (Hornsby, 1997b: 12, 46–80; Kim, 2003: 122). The consequence of this position, however, is to undermine his argument that reasons are causes, and this opens up the question of how reasons and intentions can have explanatory force.

This version of monism – Davidson's anomalous monism – rests on three premises (Kim, 2003: 122): (1) Mind–body causal interaction – mental events are caused by or cause physical events; (2) nomologicality of causation – events related as cause and effect must instantiate a strict law; (3) anomalism of the mental – there are no strict laws involving mental kinds.

Davidson's argument secures the autonomy of the mental, but the consequence seems to be that mental events have no explanatory force (Antony, 1989). These three premises, taken together, imply that reasons, beliefs, desires or intentions cannot be causes *as* reasons, or as beliefs and so on. The only kind of explanation in this argument is causal explanation, yet mental events have causal efficacy only because 'any causal relation involving a mental event and a physical event [Premise 1] holds only because a strict *physical* law subsumes the two events under *physical* events or descriptions' [Premise 2] (Kim, 2003: 122; parenthetical inserts are mine, emphasis added).

These two premises, combined with the third premise, imply that the mental cannot be *reduced* to the physical. This much is secured, but as a result propositional attitudes (understood broadly) lack explanatory force precisely because they are anomalous. The core commitment which produces this result seems to be to physicalism. Without that commitment, some space is opened up for a consideration of how propositional attitudes might explain.

Either propositional attitudes have no explanatory force because only causes explain, and these kinds of attitudes are the wrong kind of candidates for causes; or propositional attitudes have explanatory force even if they are not causes. The point about intentional explanations, moreover, is that they aim to be explanations – they are not designed to be something other than explanations, such as understandings, or strictly construed, as in the hermeneutic tradition, as interpretations (cf. Descombes, 1995: 55–61). We could continue to call the force of intentional explanations a 'causal' force if we think that causation and explanation are inextricably linked, but this might evacuate from the concept of cause much of its meaning; it is to trade on the physicalist background of the concept of cause after having questioned the commitment to physicalism.

If reasons-explanations have explanatory force but are not causal, then how do they manage to explain? Both Vogler (2002) and Schueler (2003) consider this question. The way that this explanatory gap is filled in by Vogler is through

her specification of a means–ends relationship which structures intentional action. Given her attention to desirability characterizations of action and, more directly, her attention to the point of wrongdoing, I treat her solution as compatible with that of Schueler.[29] Vogler, moreover, provides support for a conclusion that actions which are done for a reason are all of intentional action, that reasons are a 'defining or essential feature of action' (Schueler, 2003: 128).

Schueler takes up an argument in Nagel (Nagel, 1990: 115; Schueler, 2003: 50–5, 84–7).[30] As Schueler points out, Nagel's point is like Davidson's (but inverted). The latter holds that, unless reasons are causes, reasons-explanations really do not explain at all. 'Nagel thinks that reasons explanations are not causal (since they apply to autonomous choices); hence he thinks that reasons explanations do not really explain' (Schueler, 2003: 50). Schueler shows how reasons-explanations include character traits of persons. Reasons have explanatory force if we presume character-formation. That is to say there is an empirical self doing the intending and that action presupposes a character-forming community of will – an intentional community. This move by Schueler still preserves the non-causal structure of action.

Mele (2003: 80) has argued that 'as long as Davidson's challenge to non-causalists remains unmet, causalism will be the biggest game in town, if not the only one'. The arguments of Schueler and Vogler go some way toward meeting this challenge. That is not to say the debate about action is anywhere near over; it continues in a renewed way. Nor does this say that there are not important differences among the critics of the causal argument.

There are relevant differences between Schueler and Vogler. At a minimum, both are resisting an account of action modeled on bodily movement, under which action is an event connected to antecedent events (and perhaps states) through a law-like relation.[31] Davidson, however, is much more the target in Schueler than in Vogler.[32] Schueler is concerned with two separate problems: the belief–desire account of reasons-explanations; and the claim that such explanations are causal. Vogler, in contrast, takes up a version of this first problem but via a different route – through the investigation of the structure of intentional action – while not directly taking up the second problem. Schueler is committed to a teleological alternative to causal reasons-explanations; Vogler is not explicitly committed to this alternative.

Further, for Schueler, reasons-explanations are intrinsically normative, while, for Vogler, calculative reasons stand alone, they are not inherently normative – they do not need to be normative to provide a structure for intentional action.[33] Indeed, one central point in her argument is that instrumentalism goes wrong because of its moral psychological commitments; a calculative view of practical reason does not turn on any specific moral psychology (Vogler, 2002: 23–4).

These are important differences, in particular the latter one. I am sympathetic to Vogler, but acknowledge that the question of the normativity of action is still not settled. In particular, there is now in place a powerful argument which rejects instrumentalism and questions whether the nature of agency or of practical thought in themselves are enough to specify standards of practical reason, and which looks instead for those standards in the virtues of character (Setiya, 2005, 2007). This perspective is an important counterpoint to Vogler, and I therefore consider some of the implications here.

I am in agreement with Setiya that 'reasons for acting must be seen as reasons, but need not be seen under the guise of the good'. Given this article's interest in forms of explanation, I make a distinction between explanatory reasons, about which there is nothing essentially normative, and reasons, which justify action (cf. Setiya, 2007: 27ff., 67). In my case, however, this distinction is not deployed within a debate in ethics between ethical rationalism and virtue theory (which is the choice Setiya wishes to force). The distinction is used by Setiya to support the argument that there are no standards of practical thought independent of good character. I am less interested in ethical standards here, as was pointed out in an earlier section. Although character figures in reasons-explanations, there is not one kind of reasons-explanation for virtuous action and another kind of reasons-explanation for vicious action.

In linking as equivalent good dispositions of practical thought and good character traits, Setiya in effect denies this unity of action qua action. Since viciousness cannot be morally justified, it cannot be explained. If there are no reasons to justify action – if viciousness cannot be justified – then there are no reasons to explain viciousness. One might take this line of reasoning one step further in two different ways. First, this argument suggests that whatever viciousness is – however viciousness is instantiated – it is not a form of action at all, since action must be explained by reasons. Since viciousness cannot be explained by reasons, viciousness is not instantiated as action. In this case, any notion of vicious *action* is immediately incoherent. Second, this argument might suggest a distinction between reasons-explanations and intentional explanations. Under this construction, viciousness might be explained intentionally, but that explanation is not strictly a reasons-explanation if an intentional explanation does not depend on reasons. But such a move then would beg the question of how an intentional explanation explains anything. Further, this move, arguably, would restrict intentional explanations to explanations of certain kinds of action, even if this begged question were answered. This move thus would drive an odd wedge between intentional explanations and reasons-explanations.

Thinking about these two possible extensions suggests the presence of an ambiguity in his argument. Setiya (2007: 9, 67) argues that the distinction between explanatory reasons and justifying reasons is a distinction with a difference. The ambiguity is that Setiya's argument seems to deny the difference between rationalization as explanation and rationalization as justification. His argument seems to imply that viciousness is not subject to what Thompson (2008) calls 'straightforward rationalization', in the way in which all action is subject. If, on the contrary, viciousness can be explained and if that explanation rests on straightforward rationalization, then there are standards of practical thought independent of good character, but these standards are tied to explanation rather than justification.

Setiya's argument would not force Vogler (2002: 193) to give up her position that the vicious are not sunk in rational error. There is, however, still an issue of proper focus in Vogler's work, which Setiya helps to pinpoint. This part of Vogler's argument turns on a piece of philosophical anthropology. She points out the consequences of talking about reasons being moral without a theological background – what she calls a godless variant of Thomism – and this as a way of describing why we have trouble explaining the force of external 'ought' statements (Vogler, 2002: 195). But it is not really the difference between a Thomist social order and its godless modern variant that is doing the work in her argument here. Rather, it is the fact that no social order (no form of collective life) can be brought about by individual private will (2002: 198). This is the gap which can be exploited so that a life ordered by viciousness can be lived. Clearly, however, not everyone takes advantage in order to live a life of viciousness, and it is implausible that those who forgo this opportunity do so because they have calculated that too much viciousness would be self-defeating.

Vogler argues that vice is parasitic on social order. Then there should exist 'ought' statements internal to the practices of that social order which have force, even if that order is godless. The further issue is that vice must remain marginal within the social order in question. Vogler recognizes the basic asymmetry between vice and virtue. The order in a vicious life does not conduce to 'order at large' (2002: 194), but the reasons why this is so have nothing to do with Thomism. The difficulty is that, once a bit of philosophical anthropology has been introduced, more of the same is required, given the apparent importance of these two features of viciousness: it is parasitical on order and it is ordinarily hidden from view. More needs to be said about social orders which do not presuppose Thomism, about character-formation in social orders and about the necessary truths of human cooperation. In her defense, Vogler says much more about character than do either Schueler or

Setiya, although character figures in their work as well. What needs to be said holds true for all of them.

Conclusion

Action is a central category in the social sciences, but efficient causes lack explanatory force when the subject matter is intentional action. The present article has developed this claim by, first, acknowledging the turn to mechanisms and micro-foundations in the social sciences and, second, considering the implications, particularly for discussions of causation rooted in statistical association, empirical regularity and conjunction.

I have distinguished the metaphysics of action from the metaphysics of intentional action, arguing that the former forces an implausible unity on the actions of inanimate nature and of rational agents. Agency in the metaphysics of action adds nothing to state-variable causation. Agency in the metaphysics of intentional action, in contrast, is argued to have a different structure, not reducible to state-variable causation. Recent work in social science on endogenous choice suggests that the concept of agency that is on view in literature on selection effects and social generation implies the metaphysics of intentional action. Contemporary research in the philosophy of action was considered in order to specify the structure of intentional action and the force of intentional explanations.

Agency is a thoroughgoing challenge to the standard assumption that social science is a causal science, a science which provides causal explanations of social phenomena through solving problems of causal inference. Of course, it is much less of a challenge if we continue to assimilate rational agency to the actions of inanimate nature.

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Notes

1. The issue is not whether reasons are causes in some ordinary non-technical sense of 'cause' such that reasons-explanation of actions are causal by fiat, because any explanation about how something happens is a causal account. Instead the issue is whether reasons-explanations have explanatory force without any essential reference to efficient causation (see Schueler, 2003: 18–20, 55).

2. Hempel and Hume are not conflated here. Hempel provides an account of explanation which subsumes causation within a D-N model of explanation (Hempel, 1965: 347–8, 463–87).

3. Here I am not considering a position that treats causal relations as relations among facts; in my view, similar problems with agency and action would arise. Some of the subsequent discussion on social generation might bear on such a position, however.

4. Alvarez (2005: 53); see also Hornsby (2004) and Velleman (2000 [1992]). Alvarez & Hyman (1998) parse this issue by arguing that agents cause the results of their actions but not their actions. This move is produced by their argument that actions are not events (and so cannot be caused); it works to preserve a place for causation by separating an action from its result, the latter of which is presumably then an event, and thus the right kind of thing to be implicated in a causal relation.

5. On substance causation, see Chisholm ([1976] 2004: 53–8).

6. There is a related literature on byproducts and side-effects of intentional action. I do not take that literature up here. However, Kamm (2000, 2004) makes use of the side-effects of intentional action. The notion of byproducts is most famously developed and employed in the social sciences in the work of Jon Elster. I do note that at one time the existence of unanticipated consequences was considered an argument for functionalism (Merton, 1936). Yet it is hard to see how an unanticipated consequence can be identified without at the same time identifying intentions and intended consequences. It is not obvious that the phenomenon of unanticipated or unintended consequences is a problem that undercuts the centrality of intentional action.

7. See Williams' nuanced discussion of 'function' (2001: 31–5, especially at p. 32).

8. This distinction between institutional and brute facts draws on Searle (1997). See also Anscombe (1958). For finer distinctions which separate mind-independent facts from mind-dependent facts and belief-dependent facts, see Boghossian (2006).

9. Some of this literature draws on Mackie (1965). This work is now part of a larger argument (Mackie, 1974).

10. This is a kind of skeptical question: How does a condition have the force or power to necessarily bring about its effect? I draw here on McBreen's (2007: 426ff.) discussion of Hume.

11. But see the discussion of 'The Counterfactual Test' in Kamm (2004: 24).

12. There might also be a tendency to move between 'condition' understood as a term of logic and 'condition' understood as a state of the world, but this further issue is not taken up here.

13. Institutional facts are endogenous to human action in a way that brute facts are not. They are given in a different way. It does not follow that every institutional fact is easier to change than any brute fact. But of course this does not mean that brute facts cannot be modified. 'The crucial thing setting people apart from all other living things is their ability to change their niche at will' (Colinvaux, 1978: 219).

14. This point rules out the following analogy: 'Just as a botanist might study plant development by measuring the growth of genetically identical seeds sown in different plots, so a student of government performance might examine the fate of these new organizations [regional governments], formally identical, in their diverse social and economic and cultural and political settings' (Putnam, 1993: 7). (Parenthetical material is added.) This kind of analogy runs implicitly through work on quasi-experimental research design in social research.

15. As noted in the previous section, one correction for endogeneity – the use of instrumental variables – is relative to systems of variables generated by exogenous selection. Another correction – the Heckman correction (Heckman, 1976, 1978) – is relative to endogenous choice. In subsequent work, Przeworski in fact uses the Heckman correction (see e.g. Przeworski et al., 2000; Przeworski, 2007).

16. Przeworski is silent about who this 'us' is. This is a formal construction, not limited to a particular community of will. It is meant to take in all of human action, however this action is individuated within intentional communities.

17. Vogler (2002: 19–20) challenges a claim that evolutionary mechanisms account for how belief–desire models of motivation get a purchase on practical reason.

18. The thrust of this paper is that non-genetic inheritance will implicate practical teleology, and will do so in ways that question the treatment of this kind of inheritance as an evolutionary inheritance. This attitude would probe the analogy between evolution proper and cultural evolution.

19. See also Johnson (2003: 2–6ff.) and the detailed general analysis in Descombes (1995: 151–85, 224–57).

20. I am not sure that my most basic moral intuitions are deontological, but this may be a defect in me. Yet if I am appropriately Socialized and turn toward and take up a deontological moral stance, such a stance is neither 'basic' in the right sense nor properly an 'intuition'.

21. 'Practical teleology' is a term drawn from Setiya (2007) and Thompson (2008). See also the discussion of intentional teleology in Descombes (1995: 56ff.) and the work of Wilson (1989) on teleology and intentionality.

22. Stine (1973: 72ff.); Frege ([1892]1952); cf. Hintikka (1969); Kripke (1972). Stine provided an argument which worked to preserve the distinctiveness of propositional attitudes – their indirect contexts – against both essentialism and possible world semantics which seek to avoid essentialism. (This debate harkened back to Frege's discussion of sense and reference, Kripke's work on rigid designators figured in Stine's discussion as a form of essentialism, Hintikka's work entered as a possible world semantics for propositional attitudes which was not essentialist.)

23. Thompson is circumspect throughout this book on the sources of action, in several instances distancing himself from 'causes of action' and substituting in place of this kind of locution the more ambiguously neutral 'etiological nexus' of action (Thompson, 2008: 86, 90, 92, 193).

24. This is a formal construction. An immediate response at this stage might be: Is the argument of this article really any different from the general notion that choice is embedded – that is, that the internal means–ends relationship is embedded in something which is external? In the first instance, this is just to say that *whatever* the purposive structure of action – however these are embedded – the relationship between 'means' and 'ends' is an internal relationship.

25. Setiya's account (2007: 56–9) retains a place for causation. In taking up Anscombe's (1957, 1983) arguments, he reserves a place for causation, because being moved to act is being caused to act. Still, the relation between cause and effect is not passive. Our attitude to a prospective intention to act is active and reflective (Setiya, 2007: 58).

26. See Thompson (2008: 88–9), particularly his discussion of 'straightforward rationalization'. Thompson treats Davidson's work as a theory of practical teleology (p. 90, n. 9).

27. The single quotes on 'goal' are Habermas'.

28. Weber does argue that 'the proposition X is the only means by which Y can be attained is the reverse of Y is the effect of X' (1949a: 26), thus seemingly bringing together not only science and politics but potentially causes and intentions as well. He restricted this argument to ends which were unambiguously given and, in so doing, undid the assimilation of science to politics, which this argument seemed to establish. Politics is from this point of view much more an activity than a causal process. In effect, politics does not assume settled ends, and, as a consequence, problems of social policy can never be resolved merely on the basis of purely technical considerations (1946a, 1946b, 1949b).

29. I will point to several differences between them shortly.

30. Vogler (2002: 18–24) has a good discussion of a related problem: how desire is 'transferred' from end to means.

31. For an argument that parses reasons-explanations by arguing that reasons are not causes while treating reasons-explanations as causal explanations, see Hornsby (1997a). For Hornsby, 'causation' and 'explanation' are inextricably linked concepts and both are introduced when we are told why someone did something (1997a: 133). However, her conception of 'causal-explanatory' preserves a different standard of causal intelligibility when the subject matter is action, a standard which does not assimilate actions to the 'impersonal world of causes' (p. 133).

32. But see Vogler (2002: 213–22).

33. Compare the different uses they make of the work of Korsgaard (1986, 1997), and see Dancy (2000) for a detailed discussion of this issue.

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