

PURPOSIVE-CAUSAL THEORY OF HUMAN ACTION

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ABSTRACT. This paper is concerned with the concept that lies at the core of all social phenomena, the concept of human action or agency. Action, we may argue, must be conceived as a logical primitive, or as a concept that is irreducible to any other concepts that do not themselves presuppose the notion of action or agency.

Human actions can be viewed in a variety of different and even incompatible ways. It is not surprising, therefore, that competing theories of action exist in all fields where the subject of study is human action. Hence our focus will now be on philosophical accounts of action and especially of social action (viz. multi-agent) action.

KEYWORDS: action, philosophical action theory, purposive causation.

Types of philosophical action theory

When we review the literature on the philosophical accounts of action an important fact emerges. It is that all systematic philosophical theories of action are – at least to my knowledge – really theories of single – agent action, at least as they have been formulated.

Here we shall make an attempt to classify and summarize some central philosophical theories of human action, differentiated primarily on the basis of how they characterize intentional action. All of these basic views have had “a great past” in the history of philosophy. They are also quite prominent in current discussion. From a systematic point of view I will group them into the following three classes: (1) mental cause theory, (2) agency theory, (3) hermeneutic theory. Below I will interpret these classes briefly and specifically the purposive-causal theory in detail which is the main concern

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of my paper so that they will in fact come to cover practically all the prominent philosophical theories of action.

The mental cause theory analyzes intentional action as bodily movements caused by certain kinds of mental events or states e.g., wants or volitions. Examples of this account are the views of Davidson¹, Fodor², Goldman³, Alston⁴, Danto⁵, and Sellars⁶. Under a broad interpretation of this type of theory also the “nomological” view of Brandt and Kim⁷, Churchland⁸, and Audi⁹ as well as even the so-called purposive-causal theory of Tuomela¹⁰ may be listed here.

According to the agency theory, the cause of the behavior involved in the action or the behavioral component of the action, is simply the agent himself and in this context no further cause is or, perhaps, can be asked for. R. Taylor¹¹ and Chisholm¹² are the foremost modern philosophical representatives of this old view. As to psychology and social psychology, it seems that at least the theory of Heider¹³ and the so-called attribution theory can be regarded as representing agency theory. These two theories mental cause and agency theory are thus, causal theories of action.

According to the hermeneutic theory which could also equally well be called the non-causal theory or the Wittgensteinian theory, intentional actions are not – and perhaps logically cannot be – caused by any mental events or states. Rather, the essential thing about an action is that it somehow consists in or involves some bodily movements by which the agent intends or means or aims at something and / or that the movement, accordingly, is something which is to be conceived in the context of some “meanings”, rules, norms or social practices. Action-explanations are explanations in terms of the agents’ reasons, and reason-explanations are *suigeneris* and thus not reducible to, e.g., causal ones.

Of the theories of action prominent during the last few years, von Wright’s¹⁴ important theory very clearly represents this group. The views of Melden¹⁵, Malcolm¹⁶, Stoutland¹⁷ and Abelson are also clear representatives. Other recent examples are Dray¹⁸ (1957) and Martin¹⁹ (1977).

C. Taylor’s²⁰ important goal theory may perhaps also be included fruitfully in our somewhat heterogeneous category of hermeneutic action theory. According to the goal theory, what makes a movement an action is that the movement is to be characterized and explained by citing a goal rather than some antecedent Humean cause.

Critique and alternative

Till now, we have discussed three important types of philosophical action theory, viz. the mental cause theory, the agency theory and the hermeneutic theory. But in view of several criticisms, which I am not in a position to discuss in this limited volume of the paper, all of them have serious defects. Thus, to mention in brief one grave difficulty in the case of each, the mental cause theory is subject to the difficulties due to causal chains, for instance. The agency theory is troubled with the inherent obscurity of its central notion of agent causality. The main criticism against the hermeneutic theory is connected to the fact that it, so to speak, lacks the dynamic element which would account for the action coming about.

Therefore, there is a need to propose a new type of causal action theory which avoids the criticisms against other causal theories and which, furthermore, gives a unifying account of all human activities. This new theory is the *purposive-causal theory* developed for single-agent actions. It may at first sight be regarded as a rather special “intentionalistic” and “conative” version of the mental cause theory. Yet it is in important ways e.g., due to its act-relational concept of willing, different from the standard mental cause theory. It avoids the mentioned criticisms against that theory but retains many of its attractive features.

It would be one of the main aims of this theory to extend the single-agent purposive-causal theory to the social case, viz. to the multi-agent case. The multi-agent purposive-causal theory accordingly comes to rely on some central features of the single-agent theory. But here we are not going to undertake this theory for discussion as it is not within the preview of our stipulated limit of this chapter.

To begin our discussion regarding purposive-causal theory, by an action suppose be it a single-agent or a multi-agent one; we mean roughly a performance, viz. some-thing, usually a change, an agent brings about so that this something has a “public”, viz. epistemically public, character. While giving an adequate systematic account of the notion of action one has to refer both to the antecedents and the consequences of the behavior involved in an action. The antecedents will be activated propositional attitudes like wanting i.e. the evaluative or “affective” component, believing i.e. the doxastic component, and intending i.e. the conative component. As will be seen, the notion of intentional action is intimately linked to intending. As to consequences, only behaviors with certain achievement or result

aspects will classify as actions. Intentional actions can be regarded as a kind of ‘responses’ to tasks and challenges so that the correctness of the actions as task solutions can be publicly assessed in terms of result events. Ontologically viewed a singular action is hypothesized, to be a complex event brought about by an agent. It is complex in the sense of being process-like: a singular action consists of a sequence of events.

The intention and its actualization

Let us now briefly consider the antecedents of action. For a comprehensive account let us quote R. Tuomela; “intendings, believings and other related propositional attitudes may be functionally characterized as realistically conceived dispositional states with a certain propositional structure. Conceptually or semantically these states are introduced in terms of intelligent linguistic and non-linguistic behavior, i.e. actions and other intelligent behavior. We can then say that they are introduced by reference to social conventions and social ‘practice’, as such behavior is conceptualized in terms of a social and public conceptual framework.”²¹

This introduction of mental states as “theoretical” or “theoretico-reportive” entities is functional and hence indirect, and it is given causal-theoretically in terms of the “input-output” behavior of the person, especially in terms of these inner states causing his relevant behavior in various circumstances. Thus, to intend that *p* entails being in a dispositional state with the structure *p* such that this state, given suitable internal and external circumstances, will cause the bodily behavior believed by the agent to be needed for the satisfaction of *p*, viz. the content of the intention. In a finer analysis we also need here an epistemic criterion of “mentality”, accounting for the agent’s privileged epistemic access to his mental states.

Putting it briefly, we can say that this kind of conceptual functionalism semantically introduces propositional attitudes as states with a certain causal power. It is essential that these states are realistically construed. One can then, for instance, conjoin with this some version of materialism and claim that these states are material states which future neurophysiology will tell us more about.

A related, essential matter is that these dispositional states can be mentally “manifested” and actualized, viz. singular mental events or episodes actualize them. This actualization needs not be conscious, and in the “final” scientific analysis these mental events will presumably be given a non-functional (categorical) description.

Now some, though perhaps not all, of these actualizing inner singular events can be said to activate the disposition. This as R. Tuomela takes to mean that these disposition-activating actualizations cause behavior or at least that they occur in a suitable constellation of states and events causing behavior.

An agent's wants and beliefs are the most important proximate disposition determinants of his actions. From time to time these wants and the relevant beliefs become activated due to environmental factors and "self-stimulation". Then we, typically, say that the agent forms intentions to act on these wants cum beliefs and thus commits himself to action. In other words, we may say that the wants generate intentions i.e. states of intending. This little studied type of generation is presumably causal, but still we do not a priori rule out, e.g., indeterministic non-casual generation. A want is either intrinsic i.e. when something is wanted for its own sake or extrinsic i.e. related to a duty, an obligation, challenge, etc., often ultimately serving some intrinsic want.

According to the purposive-causal theory, a human action or performance can be regarded as a sequence of events involving as its conceptually necessary components. It follows as: (1) an event realizing a motivationally active propositional attitude, (2) a bodily behavior event, and (3) a public result event or state. In the case of intentional action the propositional attitude in question is the agent's intending. The inner mental event instantiating the intending is a willing in our above sense. To illustrate, an agent's action of opening the window is taken to consist of his willing, by his bodily behavior, to open the window, of his bodily movements involved in the action, and of the result event of the window becoming open. In the case of an intentional action it is true to say that an agent must at least in some minimal sense be directly aware of it when performing it. Or to say in a better way that the agent must be aware to some degree of the basic action part of the full intentional action or at least of trying to perform that action. If for example, I am opening a window intentionally then I necessarily have some "non-observational knowledge" of my involved bodily actions. Furthermore, I am normally observationally aware of the window's becoming open.

The purposive causation

The purposive-causal theory employs the technical notion of a conduct plan in a broad sense to represent an agent's plan for acting as R. Tuomela²² has pointed out. Roughly speaking, a conduct plan

of a single agent is technically a generalization of the concept of a practical syllogism or, better, the premises of a practical syllogism. Thus, for instance, the conjunction of the premises of an ordinary practical syllogism is a conduct plan. Conduct plans are needed in two central places in the purposive-causal theory. First they are needed in the elucidation of the concept of intentional action. Secondly, they play a central role in our theory about the explanation of social action.

Let us brief the words of R. Tuomela who defines purposive causation as follows; “In the case of simple bodily actions (e.g., arm raising) the involved functionally characterized non-Human, feedback-sensitive notion of event-causation can simply be called purposive causation (or even final causation, without teleological ontic commitments). It is a “purposive-preserving” relation holding between the act relational willing and the overt behavior²³.” But here it would be note worthy that it would of course be a mistake to say that the willing caused the action.

We may say that in the purposive-causal theory the intrinsic aim of the action belongs to the agent’s causally active willing to do by his bodily behavior whatever is required in his opinion to satisfy the intention in question. Thus the intrinsic aim covers at least what ‘whatever’ here picks out. If the purpose concerns just for example, doing as is usual – then also it belongs to the intrinsic aim of the action. Our account of the role of the intrinsic aim of the action does not reduce it to the role of causality as Davidson’s theory does. In fact, our view resembles both the account given by the agency theory and also von Wright’s theory. But it must be emphasized, that purposive causal theory is a “broadly factual” nomic statement about the world rather than merely a piece of conceptual analysis. In this respect it differs from agency theory, hermeneutic theory and some interpretation of mental cause theory.

How does the purposive-causal theory account for the explanation of action? First, as to the explanation of the “mere” behavior in the action there is no other central difference as compared with the standard Davidsonian mental cause than the use of the conative notion of intending instead of the non-conative notion of wanting. As to the explanation of action there are two essential sources of difference. The first is simply that the purposive-causal theory employs purposive causation instead of mere or “ordinary” causation. The second is that in the purposive-causal theory an intentional action is ontically regarded as a singular sequence, whereas standard

mental cause theory does not include the relevant want and belief, as any kind of component in the action.

In the purposive-causal theory explanations of actions are given by reference to the agent's operative conduct plan. This makes these explanations teleological, for a conduct plan typically mentions the agent's goal or at least it indicates that the agent is inclined to behave in a certain direction or mentions some related broadly teleological matter. Since conduct plans also, one way or other, involve the agent's relevant intending, we may here speak about intentional-teleological explanations of action. Tuomela²⁴ has pointed out that a question-theoretic approach to explanation is presented and some theses concerning intentional-teleological explanations of intentional actions are defended. As to their formal-logical nature such explanations are nomological arguments of a certain exactly specified sort. Roughly, if determinism is true they are so-called arguments which are deductive and if indeterminism is true they are so-called p-arguments which are inductive.

Thus, what we have sketched above and discussed in detail will also, *mutatis mutandis*, apply to social actions, for social actions are actions suitably put together from the actions of single agents. So, let us here end our discussion by citing that the purposive causal theory is the best one discussed earlier with least criticism than other theories.

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