

University of Oxford, Department of Politics

Research Methods for Politics
Philosophy of the Social Sciences: lectures

Elizabeth Frazer
Michaelmas 2002

Lecture 5: **EXPLANATION III** –
the interpretive critique of causal explanation

The problem

An adequate explanation of an agent's behaviour or action must include reasons and understandings from the agent's point of view. But reasons cannot be 'causes'. So there can be no conventionally scientific explanation of human actions.

Key Terms

Reasons

Here is an initial analysis:-

- a reason connects an agent with his/her action
- what makes a reason a 'reason'? – connection with 'reasoning' about beliefs and their grounds
 - beliefs about ends and means
 - agent's own preferences and goals

example *Action*: going to the coffee shop

Agent: I/Agent/Bloggs...

Beliefs: * needs a shot of caffiene
* coffee contains caffiene
* coffee shop supplies coffee
* etc etc

Reason(s) for going to the coffee shop: *A. needs a shot of caffiene
*A wants a cup of coffee
*A usually has a mid-morning pick-me-up
*etc etc

- Reasons are rational if:
 - beliefs are rational
 - means-end reasoning is rational
 - preferences/desires are rational

Understanding

A first shot at an analysis:-

- Agent A understands x [x=an object/event/thing/process] if A
 - knows what x is
 - knows where x came from
 - knows where x is going
 - knows how x works
- A understands y [y=a term, phrase, sentence, proposition] if A
 - knows what is being said when y is being used (uttered/written/printed...)
 - can correctly use y in linguistic and interactive contexts
 - can correctly specify y's denotation(s)
 - can correctly specify y's connotation(s)

Interpretation

Understanding is (often) the upshot of interpretation:

- Interpreter I apprehends/experiences/observes..... z

example 'Let's meet at the bank at 7'

- I considers possible candidates for what is being said...
(7 a.m.? 7 p.m.? river bank? High Street bank? bank at the end of the playing field?)
- I fixes on one set of speech acts/connotations/denotations/meanings.
- This is the interpretation

Meaning

A highly contested concept with many rival analyses.....

- meaning as reference
- meaning as denotation
- meaning as connotation
- meaning as denotation+connotation
- meaning as upshot of interpretation
- meaning as independent of interpretation
- meaning as uncertain or indeterminate agreement between interlocutors
- meaning as uncertain or indeterminate reference
 - to a concept
 - to a 'family' or network of concepts

Subjectivism/subjectivity

- grammar: Subject – Verb – Object
- the point of view of the subject
- 'Subjectivity':
the content of the subject's point of view including the experience of being a subject
- 'Subjectivism':
the principle that we should take up the point of view of the subject
or
the systematic upshot of putting the subject prior in analysis
or
the systematic upshot of putting the subject prior in ethical/epistemological/
metaphysical terms.....

Who has said what about this?

Mill

Mill is convinced that a basic principle of science is that

'every event has a cause' –

we can call this the

PRINCIPLE OF CAUSALITY

(Consider what Popper would say about this)

Covering Law Model of explanation and prediction in social science

Law(s)	
Initial Conditions	Explanans
Events/perturbations (cause)	

Outcomes (effects)	Explanandum

Max Weber (1864-1920)

- point of departure and centre of analysis is *individual person* (not gene/DNA, not biological individual, not group)
- Categories of social science and political study – state, feudalism – should be understood as patterns/categories of ‘human interaction’;
- *interpretive* or ‘understanding’ sociology (verstehen); we can understand ourselves through introspection and analysis; we can understand others by analogy with ourselves or yet others, or by understanding of the subject’s professed intentions/motivations etc;
- typology of actions by ‘degree of understandability’
 - no problem understanding economic and related actions: (eg taking better paid job unless other considerations intervene, maximising utility)
 - more problematic: absolute ends (eg belief in God, religious values;) – sociologist needs to take these as given data (although not straightforward matter of observation)
 - more problematic still: affective, instinctive and traditional conduct

(In his empirical and analytic sociological work Weber emphasises structure much more than his methodological writings would imply. (to be discussed in future lecture))

Peter Winch (b.1926)

Winch takes issue with both Mill and Weber.

His argument with Mill is that *Mill’s belief in uniformities let alone laws in social science is only supposition* (Popper makes the same point in a philosophy generally hostile to the idea of social science (pseudoscience))

Winch also argues that philosophical analysis reveals there to be *insurmountable barriers to sensibly or reasonably understanding human beings and human action as driven by the kind of mechanistic cause and effect relations that gripped empiricist philosophy from Hume to Mill and beyond.*

As an example (p74)

Winch asks us to consider that a cat that is in tremendous pain

1. can be described as writhing in pain;
2. the cat’s movements can be plotted as a series of space-time coordinates.

However, the two are not equivalent; there is no way that ‘writhing’ can be reduced without remainder to its physical geometrical aspect. Anyone who thought that it could, that

‘a study of the mechanics of the movement of animate creatures would throw light on the concept of animate life would be the victim of a conceptual misunderstanding’

Similarly Winch argues that *to think of motives as causes in our traditional sense is also a category mistake. The link between a motive and an action is ‘conceptual’.*

Mill: explanation of human action consists of motivation (cause) and action (event) by way of the causal principle that every event has a cause

Gilbert Ryle(1900-1976): (contra Mill)

‘To explain an act as done from a certain motive is not analogous to saying that the glass broke because a stone hit it, but to the quite different type of statement that the glass broke, when the stone hit it, because the glass was brittle’

Winch:

- to say that that an act is done from a certain motive is to say that the motive is the reason for the action

- (and standards of reasonableness are not private, but have an irreducibly public status)
- An action embodies a motive/reason for action
- (otherwise it's not action, but random behaviour, or bodily perturbations)

'The social relations between men and the ideas which men's actions embody are really the same thing considered from different points of view' (p121). 'New ways of talking sufficiently important to rank as a new idea implies a new set of social relationships'

Examples 'I killed her because I really loved her';

'I killed him because I thought he was scum'

Insofar as these are intelligible accounts of motives, they are tied up with conceptual, semantic, meaningful, and sociological relationships between love and death, between contempt and murder.

Charles Taylor (b.1931)

- Develops the (Heideggerian) idea of a 'horizon' of meaning that governs intelligible human action; (and thereby governs unintelligible human action; action that breaks the 'rules', changes the rules, flouts the rules, adjusts the rules).
- This horizon or universe of meaning is what ties human beings together into social groups.
- The implication is that there may be a plurality of horizons of meanings – the nightmare of the mutually unintelligible 'ways of life', or the 'clash of civilisations' with mutually incommensurable values.
- Taylor spends a good deal of his efforts in moral philosophy trying to meet this challenge.

Donald Davidson (b.1917)

- Reasons can be causes.
- We are forced to take up the subjective point of view and to understand reasons from the agent's point of view;
- but we also are forced to impute to the agent motives/reasons that make sense to us (otherwise we cannot speak of 'action' at all).
- It is within this framework or background or field that we can analyse reasons as causes.

This position encompasses aspects of Winch's argument about meaning – meaning is the field. Notice however, that we no longer have a purely objective or independent-of-our-understandings conceptualisation of events.

The Argument

1. Weber.
 - Individualism.
 - Verstehen.
 - Degrees of intelligibility
2. Winch.
 - Belief in laws and causes in social world is only supposition
 - Humean or Millian cause is inappropriate in analysis of human (or animal) action and consciousness
 - The link between motive and action is conceptual:
 - the description of the explanandum contains elements of explanans
 - an action embodies a reason or motive for itself
 - actions are social relationships

3. Interpretation and explanation
 - Individuation of an explanandum is a matter of interpretation
 - hence it is in some measure a linguistic construction
 - hence it is in some measure indeterminate

 - For logicians:
$$x \text{ C} \rightarrow y$$
is problematic because $\text{C} \rightarrow$ is problematic
 - For interpretivists it is problematic also because the meaning of x and y are problematic. As formal placemarkers they are stable. When we substitute terms (ideology, social stability, discontent,) they are unstable.
4. Subjectivity
 - the subjectivity of the analyst
 - the subjectivity of the actors (objects of analysis)
5. Davidson
 - we must take up the actor's (subjective) point of view
 - we must impute to the actor reasons and motivations by way of which his/her action is intelligible
 - it is within this field that we can analyse reasons as causes