

Philosophy of the Social Sciences
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Lecture 7: **Structure and Agency III**
Decision and Action

The Issue

So-called scientific explanations of decision and action are based on models that bear almost no resemblance to real-world processes.

Key Concepts

Decision

Somehow it's easier to approach this via **theory of decision making**. Here is a theory of decision making:

- a decision maker has a *range of objectives*
- these are measurable in the sense, at least, of *rank orderable by 'preferredness'*
- a decision maker has a range of possible actions/courses of action (*feasible set*)
- a decision maker has (limited) knowledge of the possible outcomes of various actions (*probability and uncertainty*)
- these outcomes include the possible actions of *other decision makers*
- a decision maker has the capacity to (consciously??) (rationally??) decide

Distinguish:

- **thin rationality**: the decision maker could have mad objectives, bizarre preferences, a mistaken or otherwise faulty view of the possibilities, no knowledge of possible outcomes of various actions, but decision will still conform to the model of rationality – ie acting in light of preferences and perceived options and expectation
- **thick rationality** the fully rational decision maker has reasonable or rational objectives, a perspicuous and reasonable rank ordering that does not violate rationality conditions such as transitivity, a well ordered set of possibilities based on means-end reasoning and reasonable expectations of the possible actions of others; in thick rationality conscious calculation occurs (???) or at least the decision and action is as if conscious calculation had occurred

Distinguish:

- **conscious decision making and action**: calculation and decision occurs at the level of conscious awareness
- **unconscious decision making and action**:
 1. as conscious decision making but on 'automatic pilot' as it were; habit takes over from conscious calculation; the processes that have to be learned, in the course of cognitive development, shift to a level below consciousness
 2. as taking place in 'the unconscious' meaning briefly a level at which meanings, expectations and desires are configured differently from how they are in the conscious; hence we can unconsciously do different from or even the opposite of what we would do consciously.

Note that unconscious decision making can, theoretically have the same structure as conscious decision making:-

conscious

objectives
rank ordering
possibility
expectations (probability and uncertainty)
capacity to decide

unconscious

desires
strength/imperative of desire
fantasy
expectations (also fantasy)
action/behaviour

but: *is it decision making???*

Action

Having decided what to do the default position is that *the actor will do it*.

What can get between a decision and an action?

- incapacity
- weakness of will
- problems with the decision itself which become apparent when trying to act

Distinguish:

- **action** the morning of the day I wrote the draft of this lecture I left my office, banged my knee on the gate, walked along Broad Street, had to restrain the dog from chasing pigeons, bought a coffee, spilt some on my skirt because the door of the coffee shop banged me from behind and the dog pulled on the lead at the same time, got stuck in the door of the faculty building because it weighs about a ton and I had briefcase, bag, coffee and dog and so on *ad nauseam*.
 - some of these were **actions of mine**
 - some are **processes I underwent**
 - some are **things that happened to me**
 - some are **behaviours** (all the time I was blinking, heartbeating, putting one foot in front of the other etc)
 - some are **unconscious** (what am I DOING with this dog with me all the time??)

The problem of the determinacy or indeterminacy of description of an action

Jane's moving her fingers in contact with the keyboard IS Jane's playing the piano IS Jane making music that soothes the savage breast IS Jane's waking up the neighbours.....

IS 'waking up the neighbours' an action of Jane's???

Who has said what about this?

Weber

According to Weber a theory of action (and by extension a theory of aggregate or macro social phenomena) must be:

- **adequate on the level of meaning.** It must be articulated in terms based on *subjective interpretation* (by whom? – by the theorist) of *a coherent course of conduct, recognisable as meaningful* (to whom? – to the agent and to the theorist) according to *currently accepted norms* (ie the actions of Chinese warriors in the C15 are intelligible in light of the culture in which those roles and actions are embedded)
- **causally adequate.** A theory is causally adequate if there is a *reasonable probability that the action will always occur in the same way; that the typical or average agent would always do that.* (What counts as 'reasonable probability'?)
- **causally correct.** A process which is claimed to be *typical* must be shown to be both *meaningfully adequate* and to some degree *causally adequate*.

Alfred Schutz (1899-1959)

Weber's concept of 'causal adequacy' relates to the 'objective' context of meaning which is social science itself – only by reference to the context of what is accepted in social science can we say this or that about these probabilities. That is, it is not 'ordinary people's' expectations about others' behaviour that is relevant to causal adequacy; it is 'social scientists' or other 'experts' expectations that count.

1. Weber is not explicit about this – he tends to *run conceptions of 'subjectivity' together*
2. Weber, and other social scientists, prefer the postulate of the normativity of *rational action* rather than any other postulate, for example *norm guided action, emotionally driven action, etc*
3. But then, the model will not conform to the actor's own model of his subjective motivations, understandings and so on in relation to his action
4. Weber focusses on the *ideal agent*: this is an *ideal type*, or a *statistical construct*;
5. That is, according to this methodological principle it is not the function of social science to treat with real people

6. How are Weberian *ideal types derived*?? From what kind of experience?? Are they derived from *sense experience*?; are they *scientifically mediated and constructed*??; what is the role of Popperian *inspiration, insight, emotion etc*??
7. Answer: *it is the basic norms of the discipline* (c.f. Kuhn's 'normal science') *that determines what counts as an ideal type*
8. But there is an alternative function for social science: *social sciences can also take as their subject matter the real-ontological content of the social world as constituted, and study the relationships and patterns in themselves.* (c.f. Hayek's study of complex wholes and how patterns are maintained).

Charles Taylor (b 1931)

Taylor is critical of the basic theory of action set out above because it takes the 'mental content' of the model to be insufficiently complex:

- *where the basic model features objectives and preferences* Taylor wants to speak of complex **desires** which not only are constructed by aspects of the **social structure** but also are structured into **first order desires** which can be **ordered and re-ordered**; and **second order desires** which are the upshot of **strong evaluation of desire**
- *where the basic model features choice* Taylor emphasises that our **articulations of the choices we have** are themselves complex constructions of **evaluations**, and of our **articulations of our own identities**.
- *This is not a simple matter of description*; rather these **articulations** are constitutive of our **selves**; certain **modes of experience** are not possible without certain **self-descriptions**
- *where the basic model hypothesises*

**preferences + expectations
determine
choice+action**

Taylor emphasises that the 'causality' or 'determination' goes in TWO directions

**choices and actions under a description
(where description of choice and action is conceptually connected with self-description)
constitute
preferences and expectations
(as well as vice versa)**

Donald Davidson (b.1917)

- Sometimes, a **reason** explains an **action**. This is a species of **causal explanation**. (contra Winch)
- Giving the **reason why an agent did something** is to **name the pro-attitude to the thing or the belief about the thing**
- PROBLEM *If 'flipping the switch' and 'turning on the light' also 'alerts the prowler' then we have a problem: it looks as though 'the reason to flip the switch' is also 'the reason to alert the prowler'. SO We need to confine 'the reason for an action' to 'the reason for an action under a particular description'.*

Example

The agent's intention, to signal, explains his action, raising his arm, by redescribing 'raising his arm' as 'signalling'. If, under these conditions, an agent raises his arm, then he signals.

- (Back to the question of cause). IF **cause-effect** implies **constant conjunction** then we have a problem with single actions where there is no implication or covert assertion that 'if the circumstances were repeated the same action would follow'. Davidson says: *'there are no laws here; there is no constant conjunction from which we derive predictive power; what emerges as 'the reason' was, at the time, 'a reason'.*
- SO can intentional human behaviour be explained and predicted? Davidson says: *'when we attribute a belief, a desire, a goal, an intention, or a meaning to an agent we necessarily operate within a system of concepts in part determined by the structure of beliefs and desires of the agent himself'. Events described in physical terms are amenable to prediction and*

explanation; Events as described in the vocabulary of thought and action resist incorporation into any closed deterministic system.

Can we somehow give conditions that are not only necessary but also sufficient for an action to be intentional, using only such concepts as belief, desire and cause? I think not. The reason, very sketchily stated, is this. For a desire and a belief to explain an action in the right way, they must cause it in the right way, perhaps through a chain or process of reasoning that meets standards of rationality. I do not see how the right sort of causal process can be distinguished without, among other things, giving an account of how a decision is reached in the light of conflicting evidence and conflicting desires. I doubt whether it is possible to provide such an account at all, but certainly it cannot be done without using notions like evidence, or good reasons for believing, and these notions outrun those with which we began. [‘Psychology as Philosophy]

- **Rational Action Theory**

A reason is a rational cause. the cause must be a belief and a desire in the light of which the action is reasonable. ... the way desire and belief work to cause the action must meet further and unspecified conditions. The advantage of this mode of explanation is clear: we can explain behaviour without having to know too much about how it was caused. And the cost is appropriate: we cannot turn this mode of explanation into something more like science.

- **Agent’s subjective probabilities +
Agent’s values
affect
Action**

**Patterns in behaviour
licence inference to
Agent’s beliefs and attitudes**

But there is no predictive power here, unless we assume (unrealistically) that beliefs and values are fixed.

Summary

1. Questions: Does it matter if our scientific models aren’t realistic?
What does scientific mean, in context of decision and action?
2. Decision: a basic model
3. Action: a basic explanation
4. Weber: meaning adequacy
causal adequacy
causal correctness
5. Schutz: problem of subjectivity
problem of ideal typification
social science as phenomenological analysis of complexity
6. Taylor: complexity of ‘mental content’
7. Davidson: problem of description
intentions, reasons and actions – and descriptions
‘there are no laws here’

