

My thesis is concerned with the question about the appropriate form of explanations in historiography (and the social sciences). Its main thesis is that these disciplines basically deal with human actions which require a certain form of explanation, namely a teleological or intentional explanation. This means that past human actions and their results will have to be explained by reasons of agents, not by causes (and reasons are not causes). Historiography, therefore, employs a method of explanation which is in stark contrast to the one of the sciences, foremost physics, whose method of explanation is causal and relies on laws of nature. I attempt to show this by undertaking a conceptual investigation of the notion of historical explanation.

There is a long debate in philosophy about the appropriate form of explanation of human action, which I briefly describe in chs. 0.II and 0.III of the introduction to my thesis, as well as parallel debates in the field of philosophy of history and social sciences. The thesis is broadly divided into three parts (A, B, C): the first is a conceptual examination of the concept of explaining (ch. A), in the second I discuss explanations of actions (ch. B.I-B.II.1), then explanations of actions by reasons (ch. B.II.2-B.II.5), and apply the results to historical explanations (ch. C.I-C.II).

Chapter A starts with a brief defense of a conceptual investigation of the nature of historical explanation and justifies why the thesis does not deal with a description of the explanatory practice of historians and social scientists (ch. A.I). Furthermore, I reject a bundle of initial objections according to which the historian's subject of inquiry does not consist of human actions at all, but of past events in general (i.e., including those of natural history), or of so-called "agentless" "structures", "institutions", or "processes" (ch. A.II). That historical explanations are basically intentional explanations of human actions may provoke the objection that history is not the history of "great deeds of great men". I reply that my approach is not a defense of an outdated image of historiography, for on the one hand it incorporates collective actions, and on the other it does not imply that all historical events were intended. The aforementioned concerns do not license an anti-intentionalist view of history, for we do indeed ascribe accountability, reasons, and partly planning as characteristics of intentionality to agents of the past. Moreover, "structural explanations" ultimately represent nothing but extremely abbreviated intentional explanations of actions.

After these initial safeguards of my project as a whole, I shall turn to a conceptual investigation of "explaining" in ch. A.III. I develop my position through a discussion and critique of two influential analytical conceptions of historical explanation: Hempel's DN model (ch. A.III.1) and Danto's model of narrative explanation (A.III.2). I show some shortcomings of Hempel's model and further how Danto's model ultimately collapses into the DN model.

I begin developing my positive explication of explanation (ch. A.III.3) with an overview of the variety of meaning of "explaining", so that it is quite misguided to assume, as Hempel did, that explaining has *one* logical form. I discuss intelligibility, adequacy, and completeness as criteria of explanation. I argue that an explanation, at least when fully formulated, represents an argument that allows the explanandum to be derived. For explanations of human actions, a practical syllogism, i.e., an explanation based on intentions and beliefs, represents such a model.

In the following (ch. A.IV), an excursus gives a concise overview of different theories of causality (regularity, counterfactual, and interventionist theory) and defends the interventionist theory. The meaning of "the cause" and the problem of how it is delimited against a field of further conditions is discussed, as well as the fact that causal relations do not entail necessity and are sensually perceptible despite Hume's skepticism.

Part B, on theory of action, first deals with the question of what actions are and how they differ from mere bodily movements. I argue for the view that intentional actions are not physical events, but are semantically "charged", i.e., have a meaning that we know through

our form of life (ch. B.I). The variety of what we call “explanation of an action” is explored, and I raise some objections to causalist theories of action (chs. B.II.1-2). My argument includes the philosophy-of-language elucidation that intentions are not mental (or neurological) entities at all. In particular, I argue that intentional explanations of action by practical syllogisms are not causal explanations because causes are conceptually distinct from their effects, whereas actions must be understood as expressions or manifestations of intentions, i.e., intentions are conceptually related to actions. We would not ascribe an intention to someone if he did not perform the action in question or did not “set out” to perform it when he had the opportunity to do so. I discuss what I mean by “having opportunity”. I distinguish my approach from other variants of this “Logical Connection Argument” from the literature (Melden, von Wright) and their rightly pointed out shortcomings. A key argument for not taking reasons to be causes is that reasons make the action seem *appropriate, rational, or good* in the eyes of the agents, a characteristic that causes do not exhibit (ch. B.II.3).

I then (ch. B.II.4) discuss in detail the logical structure of the practical syllogism and characterize the volitional premise in its first-person formulation as an expression of self-commitment, that is, as a form of non-descriptivist language use. I propose a prescriptive understanding of the practical syllogism in the first person, which thus differs in principle from causal explanations, and defend it against some objections. I further address the interdependence of intention and belief attributions, the nature of necessitation and of the conclusion of a practical syllogism, as well as whether a practical syllogism requires a rationality premise to be logically valid. I then attack the view that intentions and beliefs are theoretical concepts, and elaborate in what sense there can be any talk of causation of intentional actions at all.

In Part C, I apply the results of my conceptual investigations of human action explanations to the domain of historical explanations. I argue with von Wright that historical why-explanations are intentional explanations of human actions and that the practical syllogism lies at their core, not the DN model or any other causal model (ch. C.I). I then defend my model against several objections, 1) that (almost) nothing can be found out about intentions of others, that 2) the intentional model is insufficient for historical explanations because it leaves the reasons of agents unexplained, that 3) historiography and the social sciences are mainly concerned with the unintended consequences of intentional actions and historians and social scientists explain with the help of so-called “mechanisms” (e.g. “A rise in money causes inflation”); and 4) that actions of historical agents were often enough irrational actions (ch. C.II).

In the following chapter (C.III), I discuss contemporary theories of collective action and reject them, partly because they presuppose the existence of collective subjects, partly because they make implausible assumptions about the intentionality of others’ actions, and partly because they assume the individual ownership thesis about intentions, which is misguided. I present a modest theory of collective actions.

Finally (ch. C.IV), I formulate some consequences of my approach: that the course of history is in principle open (but not because there are “real existing possibilities” in history, as has been argued in the literature); that we can in principle understand the reasons for action of past agents and that these are accessible to us. The task of a historian is, among other things, to grasp the context of a historically transmitted action or its outcome in order to reconstruct from it the intentions and ends-means beliefs of historical agents. Historical explanations do not consist in the identification of causes of actions, which may be understood in analogy to the concept of cause in the natural sciences. I thus argue for a rehabilitation of the idea of historical understanding, purified of dualistic or monistic misconceptions of the nature of mind.