

Objections to causalist models of historical explanation

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Abstract:

Causalism is widespread in the theory of historical explanations and explanations of human actions in general. They assume that in order for historiography and the humanities in general to be scientific at all, those disciplines have to take over the explanation methods of the sciences, i.e. their causal mode of explanation. Against this, I want to argue that disciplines like history, sociology, political sciences, economics a.s.o. deal with human actions. And explanations of human actions, may they be past or present or even future human actions, are not causal explanations at all. In explaining human actions, we state the reasons, i.e. the purposes, goals, intentions, decisions and beliefs of the agents performing it (“teleological explanations”). I shall argue that the true form of explanation of human actions takes the agent’s intentions and beliefs as premises of a practical syllogism, from which the explanandum, the action, follows logically, not causally. To show this I make use of an improved version of the so called “Logical Connection Argument”, among others. In general: To explain an human action requires an investigation of the actions context to determine the goals aims and intentions of the agent.

This is applied to past human actions: Historians comb through the bequeathed source data, to get a picture as precise as possible concerning the context of past actions and to reconstruct from it the intentions, goals, purposes and beliefs of the historical agents. The explanation of past actions admittedly has special problems, foremost those which have to do with our knowledge of the past action’s context, but those are no problems *sui generis*, such that it can be said with some qualifications, that historical explanations work like everyday explanations of contemporary’s actions: As the crossing of a street by a contemporary agent under certain contextual conditions is the expression of his intention to go to work, so Caesar’s crossing of the Rubicon is the expression of his intention to seize power in Rome under the historically transmitted circumstances of his action. The data material which has come down to us contemporaries is the *interpretandum* from which the historian derives goals and intentions of historical agents and with which further actions of the historical agents can be interpreted. So, to explain an action by a reason is not to refer to another event which is a Humean cause of it, but to embed the action in a context such that it can be understood, what the agent went after and thereby it will be understood, what the action was. The task of the historian then is to identify the intentions, purposes and goals, sometimes the means-end-beliefs of historical agents to make their bequeathed actions (and artefacts) intelligible to us.