

CAN MOTIVES BE CAUSES OF ACTIONS?

Recent writers on philosophical psychology do not look favourably on the thesis that motives are *causes* of human actions. This thesis is logically secondary to the contention that the concept of cause cannot intelligibly be applied to the explanation of human actions. Since Ryle's analysis of mental concepts, Austin, Peters, Urmson, Anscombe, Dray, and Melden have discovered new categorical boundaries separating psychological concepts from the language of natural events. A psychological explanation is not a causal explanation; the two, it is held, are logically incompatible. Though to cite the motive for an act or to cite the cause of an event, is to answer the question 'why', the meaning of the question is different in the two cases. It has been argued that to ask 'why' about a human action is to make the action rationally intelligible by filling out its purpose and context, not to mention the beliefs and attitudes of the agent who performs it. A motive explains an action by identifying the agent's reason for doing it. Reasons, like causes, are said to have explanatory power, but a reason is not a cause in the sense of an antecedent event. Or to put the matter in a more radical manner, the rational explanation of an action is so incompatible with any causal explanation that in the former case we should only have description of behaviour in purposive language, while in the latter it would be inappropriate, since causally explicable behaviour could only be involuntary.

My purpose, here, is not to attempt a critique of the views which insist on a radical distinction between reason and causes. Without any intention of minimising the value of the conceptual insights of such views, I shall content myself with indicating that Hume's thesis that human actions are caused by motives is not rendered a howler by the recent philosophical disfavour it has fallen into.

Some of the criticisms advanced against the view that human actions are causally explicable may be taken

as directed against Hume. I propose to offer the following considerations. Usually Hume's view that cause and effect are logically distinct or independent is appealed to show that the concept of cause cannot be applied to the explanation of human actions. It is argued that a cause must be logically distinct from the alleged effect; but a reason for an action is not logically distinct from the action; therefore, reasons (for that matter any motive) are not causes of action. In one or more versions this argument, inspired by Ryle's treatment of motives in *The Concept of Mind*, is fairly common and can be found in the writings of Kenny, Hampshire, Peters, Melden and Winch. The credibility of the argument depends on the contention that a reason makes an action intelligible by redescribing it in purposive language. We do not have two events, but only one under different descriptions. Causal relations, however, demand distinct events.

Let us consider Hume's logical independence thesis concerning the relationship between cause and effect. That the cause and the effect must be distinct existents is certainly what we have learnt from Hume. But is that the whole story of his views about the causal relation? In some of his moods he wants nothing more than to say that there is no "real intelligible connexion" between external objects. 'Intelligible' and 'real' are not synonymous; and Hume cannot be said to be committed to a denial of the possibility or actuality of real connexion. On page 29 of the *Treatise* he says something that might set the idea of causal necessity in another light: "Wherever ideas are adequate representations of objects, the relations, contradictions and agreements of the ideas are all applicable to the objects." If that be so, why not likewise in the case of cause and effect? Hume does not ever contend that the ideas between which the necessary connexion or the causal relation holds are not adequate representations of objects. What then shall we decide about the intelligibility and reality of the relation or idea of necessary connexion? I am aware that it might of course be objected that the relation of cause and effect does not hold between ideas *qua* ideas but only between

ideas *qua* existents. This point is in fact raised by Kemp Smith, and hence the relation is not discoverable by comparing independently given entities. Without contending the validity of the objection it may be submitted that there can be an interpretation on which the causal relation in some sense shares in the character of knowledge. If the proposed interpretation holds good, then the relation between cause and effect no longer remains open, at least to the extent of making them logically independent. Further, unless one should be inclined to discount a great deal of Hume's characterization of a relation as "that quality, by which two ideas are connected together in the imagination" (*ibid.*, p. 13), the proposed interpretation of the relation of cause and effect would not be without viability. If the necessary connexion between cause and effect is a relation (which Hume says it is) and the ideas it relates are in no way inadequate representations of objects (there is no reason why they should be so), then one can, by Hume's criterion of reference, apply the relation or idea of necessary connexion to objects.

Now then what is called "the determination of the mind" be accounted for? It is said that the determination is a specific mode of causation, in the imagination, when one adopts the attitude of the spectator in respect of objects in constant conjunction. A feeling of being necessitated is experienced, and hence a transition from a given object to its usual attendant becomes possible. The feeling and the transition need not be sharply distinguished, though a mental content and a mental activity are to be kept separate. We are in no way concerned with such nice questions. The value of this experience of necessity lies in that any assertion of causal connexion between objects is argued from it. In this sense, it would not be improper to say that the determination is a *universal condition*, for asserting causal relation being external objects. Hume says: "Had ideas no more union in the fancy than objects seem to have to the understanding, we could never draw any inference from causes to effects" (*ibid.*, p. 92). That the feeling of necessity is transferred to the external world

is what we find in the *Treatise*. But this should be taken as a metaphor, far less as a confession of animistic projection. Rather, the determination is significant as a "model" (*ibid.*, p. 165). If we take the model view of the determination of the mind seriously, certain important consequences follow. There has got to be some sort of structural similarity between the model and the phenomena in respect of which it is used. If determination of the mind is a specific mode of causation and forms thereby the basis of causal connexion, then as a model it is an analogue of causal phenomena. The structural similarity between the model and the phenomena helps us in understanding and explaining the phenomena by providing us with a technique for talking about it. As an analogue model of causation "the determination of the mind" is authenticated by our causal inferences. Their *natural* character does not mean that they have to be arbitrary. Hume points it out on page 484 of the *Treatise*. His reasons for the non-arbitrary character of our causal inferences is that they are based on such principles of the imagination that "are permanent, irresistible, and universal" (*ibid.*, p. 225).

Unless I have thoroughly misunderstood the nature of Hume's notion of determination, it has not been his intention to say that causation is nothing but constant conjunction, as the protagonists of the logical distinctness of cause and effect appear to imply. Rather, "necessity makes an *essential part* of causation" (*ibid.*, p. 407, italics not in the text) is what Hume says. If causal explanation of human actions is a methodological device for Hume, the practical utility of the model of the determination of the mind cannot be underplayed. The union of determinant factors with human actions is not enough, it has got to be "certain" or reliable if explanations of human actions are to be viable. If the union is *natural*, i.e., peculiar to human nature (at this point another model of Hume, e.g., the model of mirror: "the minds of men are mirrors to one another", is interesting to notice) then causal explanations of human actions become reliable and practically interesting. As for assurance, in the context of practical interest, causal explanations of

human actions it should be preferable on account of its non-empty character as opposed to the empty assurance of logical necessity.

Now about motives. Hume holds that human actions, when they are voluntary, are determined or have causes. He assimilates a variety of items with the class of causes, e.g. the agent's motives, temper, situation, character, and the indirect passions with "bent or tendency". Jointly or severally these can be the antecedent determinants of human actions. Whether they uniquely determine an action is another question. But it has been Hume's contention that antecedent determinants settle or select the range of possibilities that an agent can choose from. To be more exact, according to him, since actions have a constant union with motives, temper and circumstances, an inference from one to the other is possible. Hume sometimes uses 'motive' and 'character' in an interchangeable fashion, when, for example, he says that character is something durable and constant in man which gives his actions moral quality, or for that matter, "when we praise any actions we regard only the motives that produced them" (*ibid.*, p. 477). To this class of "durable principles of the mind" can be assimilated what he calls the calm passions which are "the settled principles of action". Motive then, for Hume is a name for whatever influences the will. The causal view concerning human actions is derived from the "uniformity of human actions" or from the fact that there is "a general course of nature in actions" (*ibid.*, pp. 402 and 403). This uniformity consists in the constant union and connexion between like human actions and like motives of agents. The constancy of "the union betwixt motives and actions" together with the "determination of the mind" make it possible to infer the existence of one from that of another.

The causal model invoked by Hume is an explanatory device, and if this assertion is philosophically unobjectionable his determinism can be said to be methodological. Various factors occur in explanation of human actions.

Some may be antecedent factors, others may be law-like factors. And Hume employs both, in addition to an including of teleological factors. It is not easy to say if he intends any of the factors alone to do the explanatory job. He mentions antecedent, law-like and teleological factors as those that might influence the will, besides good and evil. Sometimes 'motive' is a general term for all the factors determining the will. He takes the word 'motive' in the etymological sense meaning that which *moves* or induces a person to act in a certain way; and the candidates would be found in a mixed bag. He includes intention also as a factor in the causal explanation of actions. "By the intention we judge of the actions" (*ibid.*, p. 348), says Hume.

It might be objected that while it is right to say that singular causal statements imply generalizations, it is wrong to suppose that motives, desires, passions and intentions are causes of actions. It is said that Hume supposes that the statement that a person did something because, say, he was angry, carries the implication that if the circumstances were repeated the same action would follow. Such an argument is put forward by Hart and Honore. Further, it may be that we do have rough laws that can be improved. Whether such laws can be made the basis of reliable predictions is another issue. But it does not follow that Hume is essentially wrong in claiming that singular causal statements entail laws. If he is taken to mean that no particular law is entailed by a singular causal claim, then it can be defended without defending any law. In another way, we may, by way of settling the claim, look for some generalization of which an action in question may serve as an instance. If a causal claim assigns a motive, the success or failure of the assignment would depend on showing it to be an instance of a regularity. In this respect assignment of motive works in the same way as the attribution of causes. Generalizations about human behaviour need not be on the whole about behavioural regularities. That is why Hume includes interpretations of situations, temper of the agent, etc., in the set of attributive conditions. The uniformity of human actions presupposed in assignment of motives is

hardly mechanical, quantifiable uniformity. It is a matter of aim, purpose and value that involve both the agent and the spectator. Some prisoners, on discovering the impossibility of their escape, choose to work upon the nature of the gaoler, some upon the stone and iron. But none perhaps resist from attempts for their freedom. I think this use of Hume's own example would be permissible.

The inferences on which we base our beliefs about matters of fact are not formally valid. There should be no reason for appealing to this logical point, nor can it be decisive. The relation of cause and effect is a law-like one, and when we are to deal with human actions we are not really concerned with the formal validity of such relations. When we are to formulate our predictions in non-metrical terms, as we do for human actions, the sort of inference that leads to predictions will not have to specify a class of similar actions. We hardly ever demand any detailed and delicate description capable of identifying unambiguously one and only one action whose occurrence would satisfy the prediction. There is a limit to precision, and human actions are no exception to the fact that in nature no prediction can identify a determinate event without ambiguity. It is we, *qua* spectators, who set up conventions (this too is based on socio-cultural considerations and not an arbitrary, isolated affair) as regards what performance of an agent will be taken as satisfying our predictions about him. In the domain of human actions, *predictability* and *determinism* need not be equivalents in the strong logical sense of the terms. Predictability in practice is what Hume demands for this methological determinism.

'Motive' is indeed a puzzling word and yet ascription of causal role to the determinants of human actions is a commonsense position. A complete abandonment of the position is urged by many recent writers. Hume has observed that a motive need not always be an antecedent occurrent. On this issue Ryle thinks that a motive is a disposition to behave, while Anscombe and Melden hold that it is intention to do the deed. But despite their differences they

agree that explanations of human actions are possible in terms of motives. It may be asked: how are the explanations of human actions in terms of antecedent factors, dispositions and intentions related, and if they are compatible? Now Hume does not distinguish between the factors in terms of which explanations of actions are offered. His inventory of determinants of actions, we have noted above, includes dispositions as well as occurrences, and the fact that they are categorically separate appears to have been glossed over by him. He has been content with some sort of relation between them. As regards the question of compatibility, however, he was keenly aware. We find him carefully distinguishing actions done from motives from those that are done without design or by accident. Even actions that can be done without any other motive than their own sake (see *Treatise*, p. 479) has also been taken account of.

But Hume's general position remains such that he assimilates the explanatory factors of human actions, namely, the agent's desires, intentions, passions and motives — all that we nowadays call reasons — to causes. What does it mean to assimilate reasons for actions with causes? It is to give the necessary and/or sufficient conditions of actions to be explained. Generalizations link reasons for actions and actions, just as causes of occurrences and occurrences are linked. Both the cause-explanation and reason-explanation are signified by such words as 'because', 'cause', and even 'reason'. Again, motive or reason explanations could not be given if there were not regular causal sequences in the world. And since actions could not be directed to ends unless one action was more likely to be followed by a certain consequence than another. This matter is important equally for the agent as well as the spectator. In this respect it would be wrong to say, as Flew has suggested, that in the spectator's world "there seems to be no room for the interests of agents."

There are philosophers who would separate reasons and causes. They argue that psychological antecedents do not

explain actions. It has been observed that a cause must be describable without reference to its effect, while reasons for actions cannot be so described. Hence reasons for actions are not causes. The argument, if the assumption about the independent describability of causes from effects is not unsound, is valid, though it over-simplifies the case. Hume's candidates of 'motive' are not a homogeneous lot, they are as diverse as dispositions and psychological occurrences, antecedent factors as well as teleological ones. Some passions like pride (when it is not a character-trait) may qualify for such a notion of cause which can be described in isolation from its effect, though there are reasons to doubt whether pride can be so understood. When Anscombe says that motives can be "backward-looking", does not the class include feelings and emotions? And I suppose it would be pertinent to ask that. Again, what she calls "forward-looking" motives or intentions, does not an explanation in its term require mention of some of the agent's character-traits, emotions, beliefs and ends in order to be intelligible? Should it not be regarded a mistake to claim that it does, some causal factor will have been admitted in the explanation. That psychological antecedents of actions and the conative dispositions of the agent need then be taken into account in giving an explanation of human actions is a matter that merits admission. Hume's view that the psychological antecedents and dispositions are causally related to the agent's actions, or that they have a necessary place in causal explanation of human actions, has a methodological advantage, namely, this way of thinking renders human actions intelligible by relating them to the agent's experiences and beliefs which determine his behaviour. Attribution of causal efficacy to people's conative attitudes seems to be in order since conation is among the causes of behaviour.

Psychological concepts are explanatory, and a reason for an action, if our explanation has to be causal, may be a kind of cause. Motives are identified in terms of the actions they motivate. But can we, on that account, say that there can be a motive before an action has been performed?

Much would depend on what one means by 'motive'. Supposing that one means by 'motive', intention, does the claim that it makes no sense to speak of a motive before an action has been performed supplant the causal model of explanation of human actions? Melden has argued that the motive of an action is part of the way in which we identify the action (*Free Action*, Humanities Press, 1961, p. 77). It is specially interesting since Melden is one among others who would never ascribe causal status to a motive. Even Ryle, who had argued that motives were not causes, as Kenny noted, offered a theory which is no less causal. The irony, if it is one, is not plain, and not without deeper reasons. The causal model of explanation is good for two purposes as far as Hume is concerned. It is employed with a view to explaining human actions, identifying the agent's motives by what he does. On the other hand, we venture to tell how our agent would behave if his motives were such and such. In either case the attribution of a motive is the sort of assertion that can be justified by showing it to be an instance of a regularity. And in this respect the concept of motive works in the same way as the concept of cause.

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