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IS THERE ANY SUCH THING AS A SOCIAL OR BEHAVIOURAL SCIENCE?

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment
of the requirements for the degree of
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Michael Gordon Russell

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ABSTRACT

The type of explanation characteristic of science is causal, and it is natural to think that this type of explanation is appropriate for all events, no matter what their nature. It is this global assumption that is questioned in this thesis.

Chapter One presents a historical exposition of the development of causal explanation since the time of David Hume. The perennial theme has been the conceptual separability of causally related events and the need to insert an empirical law to deduce one from the other. Karl Popper (the subject of Chapter Two) has also used this deductive feature of causal explanation, and even argues for the unity of science, social and natural, on the strength of it. Throughout this tradition social behaviour is supposedly caused and requires the same kind of explanatory apparatus as any other behaviour.

The Wittgensteinian tradition (Chapter Three) opposes any such tradition by emphasizing the importance of normative rules governing human action, as opposed to any causal relations. In particular, the conceptual notion of a 'criterion of identity' is investigated in relation to both the natural and social sciences, and it is concluded that the logic of explanation works very differently in these two disciplines. This is so for two reasons. First, because the criteria of identity for any concept are logically, not contingently, related to that concept; and as the criteria for any action are the surrounding contexts, then those surrounding contexts cannot be the causes of the behaviour concerned in any Humean sense. Second, the criteria of identity are not imposed upon social phenomena from 'without', as is the case in the natural sciences; they are constituted from within,

and thus a social science must base the rules it uses upon the criteria belonging to the group being studied rather than the group of researchers studying it.

Social scientists cannot then give a causal explanation of human behaviour. But they can explain it by giving reasons; that is, by showing how the behaviour is conceptually related to the context by classifying it under the appropriate logical category. This point is emphasized in an investigation of the so-called 'Rationality Principle' in Chapter Four. Popper asserts that 'rational' behaviour is an 'appropriate' (causal) response to a particular problem situation; 'appropriate' being in accordance with the objective or brute facts. But the Wittgensteinian point remains however, i.e. that the problem which any agent is responding to is conceptually linked to that action and cannot therefore the cause of it. Furthermore, rationality cannot be measured against any Popperian 'objective' or 'brute' facts; rather, rational behaviour is so according to certain human conventions, and these conventions are normative rather than objective in the Popperian sense. Rational behaviour is not then behaviour in accordance with the 'facts', but behaviour in accordance with relative normative criteria of rationality.

In conclusion, it is wholly inappropriate to explain human behaviour in terms of 'causes' and 'objective facts'.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

If asked to name that which most distinguishes twentieth century Western culture from all other cultures, most of us would draw attention to the achievements of science and technology. So useful and pervasive have they become in our everyday lives, and so drastically has science altered our world view by ridding us of superstitious and irrational beliefs, that we feel as if there is nothing that science could not, in principle at least, give a full account of. What concerns me in the following pages is one of the few remaining subjects that science has not yet been able to fully explain -- human behaviour.

Galileo began the process of diminishing the mysteriousness of human beings by making the sun the focus of the universe instead of *homo sapiens*. Darwin carried this reduction still further by making human beings a product of the inexorable laws of nature in just the same way as all other animals and plants -- ideas of a grand purpose or design in nature became intellectual nonsense. The last aspect of human beings to be explained is the mind. Is it just a causal mechanism like the human body? Or is it somehow different? There is much hanging on this question, especially when we are reminded that the concept of mind includes those features that make human beings unique -- they can, amongst other things, think, argue, calculate, plan, decide, understand, and engage in all manner of social activities. No animals or plants do such things, and thus it is just these sorts of activities that distinguish us from them. The problem remains of how such activities can be accounted for. Given the enormous successes that science has achieved, we feel confident that there should be no difference in principle between explaining the

regularities observed in human behaviour and those shown in the behaviour of planets, plants, and both the lower and higher animals. Given the time and technical expertise in the laboratory, it is often claimed, then in theory all that is required is persistence for the behaviour that makes human beings unique to be fully explained by science. Indeed, it is further claimed, it will in fact be the case.

It is this last claim that I wish to examine and question in this dissertation. This I do by comparing several different philosophical traditions. In the first chapter the concept of cause and causal explanation in both the natural and social sciences is examined by tracing its development and increasing sophistication through the empiricist philosophies of Hume, Mill, and Hempel. The type of explanatory account of human behaviour to be examined in Chapter Two is that given by the very influential philosopher of science, Karl Popper. He claims to have escaped the empiricist tradition and attempts to give a different basis for the explanation of human behaviour in light of his new philosophy of science and evolutionary epistemology. In Chapters Three and Four, the last tradition discussed is the new philosophy of Wittgenstein, Winch, and Searle, and the implications it has for the philosophies discussed in Chapters One and Two.

The whole of this dissertation takes, in effect, the form of a *reductio*. This can be best shown by the following schema.

(1) Chapters One and Two consist of an investigation of the logical nature of causal explanation.

(2) Chapters Three and Four show that the phenomena of human behaviour cannot meet these logical requirements.

(3) It follows, therefore, that human behaviour cannot be causally explained. This has the corollary, of course, that because scientific explanation is causal, then human behaviour cannot be a proper subject matter for scientific investigations.

After establishing these negative theses I try to show, with examples, how one actually should go about explaining human behaviour. This is done by using a type of explanation which is not of the same logical kind as that used in science, but is nonetheless perfectly respectable in its own right. Finally, in Chapter Five I attempt a diagnosis of why we have been so easily lured into mistakenly thinking that science is the only way to properly enlighten us, and an explanation of why we should instead regard science as just **one** of the activities that we do, there being others that are at least as important, and some more so in governing our everyday practices in life.