

LAWS AND EXPLANATION IN HISTORY

BY

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OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

Oxford University Press, Amen House, London E.C.4

GLASGOW NEW YORK TORONTO MELBOURNE WELLINGTON
BOMBAY CALCUTTA MADRAS KARACHI KUALA LUMPUR
CAPE TOWN IBADAN NAIROBI ACCRA

FIRST PUBLISHED 1957
REPRINTED LITHOGRAPHICALLY IN GREAT BRITAIN
AT THE UNIVERSITY PRESS, OXFORD
FROM SHEETS OF THE FIRST IMPRESSION
1960

PREFACE

IN this book I offer a discussion of the logical structure of explanation as it is given in ordinary historical writing. As the title suggests, I attempt to deal only with a certain aspect of this problem: the extent to which the giving of explanation in history requires knowledge of laws. Certain contributions to a general theory of explanation do emerge at various stages of the argument, but my main purpose is to show why I think a very prevalent view of the relation between laws and explanation unacceptable. The immediate argument arises out of a consideration of the views expressed on this subject by a number of contemporary philosophers in Britain and America, and especially by Mr. P. L. Gardiner in *The Nature of Historical Explanation*, which was published in the Oxford Classical and Philosophical Monographs Series a few years ago.

It is a pleasure to be able to acknowledge the very great debt I owe to my teacher in philosophy, Mr. W. H. Walsh. Without his guidance, and the stimulation of his own work in philosophy of history, this book would have been much worse than it is. Without his encouragement, it would not have existed at all. My thanks are also due to the many friends, especially Professor D. G. Brown and the Rev. D. D. Evans, who took time to dispute with me on a number of points; to Professor G. Ryle and Professor H. H. Price, who gave me valuable criticisms of the whole work in typescript; and to my wife, who added understanding and forbearance to active help of many kinds. I am grateful, too, to the Humanities Research Council of Canada for assistance in the form of a research grant, and to the Warden and Fellows of Nuffield College, Oxford, for making me a member of their society during the final stage of the work.

The book is a shortened version of the greater part of a thesis which was submitted for the D.Phil. degree at Oxford University in Michaelmas Term, 1955.

W. D.

Oxford
May, 1957

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THE COVERING LAW MODEL

1. *Statement of the Model*

IN recent years philosophers of history have had to reckon with a general theory of explanation which, in spite of its prestige among logicians, has often appeared to fit rather awkwardly the explanations historians actually give. To put it in a summary way, what the theory maintains is that explanation is achieved, and only achieved, *by subsuming what is to be explained under a general law*. Such an account of the basic structure of all explanation is sometimes referred to as 'the regularity analysis'; but because it makes use of the notion of bringing a case under a law, i.e. 'covering' it with a law, I shall often speak of it hereafter as 'the covering law model'.¹ In the chapters to follow I shall argue that whether or not it has a use in other fields, it is a dangerous model for the philosophy of history. For it commonly leads its advocates into talking about explanation in history in ways which are either radically incorrect or misleading in important respects.

Covering law theory is to be found variously formulated. Indeed, one of the difficulties in the way of any attempt to assess its adequacy is that of discovering exactly what its exponents intend to assert when they move beyond such summary characterizations as the one given above. Let me begin, therefore, by drawing attention to some of the things covering law theorists have actually written.

Professor K. R. Popper, who claims to be the author of the model, having put it forward as a general theory of explanation in 1935 in *Logik der Forschung*, and again ten years later in *The Open Society and Its Enemies* with particular reference

¹ P. L. Gardiner calls it "the regularity interpretation" in *The Nature of Historical Explanation*, Oxford, 1952, p. 65. See also pp. 70, 82. For a hint of 'covering law' terminology see R. B. Braithwaite's *Scientific Explanation*, Cambridge, 1953, p. 1.

to history, puts his central doctrine thus: "To give a *causal explanation* of a certain event means to derive deductively a statement (it will be called a *prognosis*) which describes that event, using as premises of the deduction some *universal laws* together with certain singular or specific sentences which we may call *initial conditions*." He continues: "The initial conditions (or more precisely, the situation described by them) are usually spoken of as the *cause* of the event in question, and the prognosis (or rather, the event described by the prognosis) as the effect. . . ."¹

In *The Open Society* Popper goes on to draw some consequences from this theory. One important consequence is the discovery of a close logical connexion between explanation, prediction, and confirmation. According to Popper, "the use of a theory for the purpose of *predicting* some specific event is just another aspect of its use for the purpose of *explaining* such an event", and the notions of *confirming* or *testing* are related in a similar way. In terms of this logical pattern it is possible to distinguish three sorts of sciences, all using the covering law model, but for different purposes and in different ways. The 'pure generalizing sciences' (e.g. physics, biology, sociology) use it to test, and hence to establish 'universal laws or hypotheses', referring to specific events only in order to do this. The 'applied generalizing sciences' (e.g. engineering) are interested in the prognosis, i.e. a prediction of a specific event, using the universal laws as means only, and taking their truth for granted. The 'historical sciences', on the other hand, are "interested in explaining a specific or particular event", rather than predicting or testing. Historians are not concerned to formulate or establish laws; what they do is 'assume' them. Popper believes that this analysis shows both why history has been said to be a study of the particular, and why this fact nevertheless cannot be cited as a reason for denying that the historian, like the natural scientist, uses general laws.

Popper's account of explanation would, I think, generally be spoken of as 'positivist'. It appears in various guises in the

¹ Quoted in *The Open Society*, London, 1952, vol. ii, p. 262.

writings of analytic philosophers influenced by the logical positivist movement of the twenties and thirties; and it is anticipated in the work of the nineteenth-century positivists Comte and Mill. Its advocacy is part of a reforming approach to the social studies, a deliberate attempt to make history more 'scientific'—in the present instance by insisting on rigorous logical standards for what may count as explanation. Its general intellectual groove, of course, can be traced back farther—for instance to the classical discussion of causality by Hume. Indeed, many modern exponents of the model explicitly acknowledge their indebtedness to Hume. Popper states his relation to Hume thus:

. . . [Hume] pointed out (as against the Cartesian view) that we cannot know anything about a necessary connection between an event *A* and another event *B*. . . . Our theory fully recognizes this Humean criticism. But it differs from Hume (1) in that it explicitly formulates the *universal hypothesis* that events of the kind *A* are always and everywhere followed by events of the kind *B*; (2) that it asserts the truth of the statement that *A* is the cause of *B*, provided that the universal hypothesis is true. Hume, in other words, only looked at the events *A* and *B* themselves; and he could not find any trace of a causal link or a necessary connection between these two. But we add a third thing, a universal law; and with respect to this law, we may speak of a causal link, or even of a necessary connection.¹

Popper's point is taken up and developed by Professor C. G. Hempel in a lucid and influential article entitled, 'The Function of General Laws in History'.² Hempel generalizes the covering law model beyond the strictly causal form, and endeavours to show in more detail how it can be successfully applied to historical cases. His formulation of the ideal, which is more rigorous than Popper's, reads thus:

The explanation of the occurrence of an event of some specific kind *E* at a certain place and time consists, as it is usually expressed, in indicating the causes or determining factors of *E*. Now the assertion that a set of events—say, of the kinds *C*₁, *C*₂, . . . , *C*_{*n*}—have caused the event to be explained amounts to the statement that, according to certain general

¹ Op. cit., p. 343.

² Reprinted in *Readings in Philosophical Analysis*, ed. H. Feigl and W. Sellars, New York, 1949, pp. 459–71.

laws, a set of events of the kinds mentioned is regularly accompanied by an event of kind *E*. Thus, the scientific explanation of the event in question consists of

- (1) a set of statements asserting the occurrence of certain events C_1, \dots, C_n at certain times and places,
- (2) a set of universal hypotheses, such that
 - (a) the statements of both groups are reasonably well confirmed by empirical evidence,
 - (b) from the two groups of statements the sentence asserting the occurrence of event *E* can be logically deduced.

In a physical explanation, group (1) would describe the initial and boundary conditions for the occurrence of the final event; generally, we shall say that group (1) states the *determining conditions* for the event to be explained, while group (2) contains the general laws on which the explanation is based; they imply the statement that whenever events of the kind described in the first group occur, an event of the kind to be explained will take place.¹

It will be noticed that the model outlined is said to give the logical structure of 'scientific' explanation, particularly that found in the most developed of the natural sciences: physics. But, as I have already suggested, it is generally part of the purpose of advocates of the model to vindicate the 'scientific' character of history—or, perhaps more accurately, to forestall the conclusion that history may operate successfully with procedures and criteria of its own. Hempel's scientism appears in uncompromising form in the dichotomy which he draws between *scientific* and *pseudo* explanation. Any alleged explanation must be either one or the other. Thus, when he goes on to consider historical cases, the only peculiarities he finds reduce to matters of precision or articulation.

Hempel gives two reasons for the common failure to realize that general laws "have a theoretical function" in explanations given in history as well as in science. He points out, first, that the laws in question are not only taken as known and established, i.e. used rather than discovered, but as so well known that in most cases they are not mentioned at all. They are to be regarded as only *implicit* in the proffered explanation. This is

¹ pp. 459-60.

particularly the case, he believes, with generalizations about human nature. In *The Open Society* Popper makes a similar, although not identical, suggestion when he writes: "Although an event is the cause of another event, which is its effect, only relative to some universal law, in history the latter are often so trivial that as a rule we take them for granted instead of making conscious use of them." And he adds the following illustration:

If we explain, for example, the first division of Poland in 1772 by pointing out that it could not possibly resist the combined power of Russia, Prussia and Austria, then we are tacitly using some trivial universal law such as: 'If of two armies which are about equally well armed and led, one has a tremendous superiority in men, then the other never wins.' . . . Such a law might be described as a law of the sociology of military power; but it is too trivial ever to raise a serious problem for the students of sociology, or to arouse their attention. Or if we explain Caesar's decision to cross the Rubicon by his ambition and energy, say, then we are using some very trivial psychological generalizations which would hardly ever arouse the attention of a psychologist.¹

The second reason given by Hempel for the widespread failure to recognize the historian's use of general laws is that it is usually very difficult to formulate the laws in question "with sufficient precision and at the same time in such a way that they are in agreement with all the relevant empirical evidence available". For what the historian offers under these conditions Hempel coins the term, 'explanation sketch'. The sketch, he says, "consists of a more or less vague indication of the laws and initial conditions considered as relevant, and it needs 'filling out' in order to turn into a full-fledged explanation. This filling out requires further empirical research, for which the sketch suggests the direction." The important point is that although the laws may only be vaguely suggested, they could be stated more precisely if the historian did his job more thoroughly. The logical theory of the covering law consequently stands unassailed; the difference between the historian's sketch and an ideal 'scientific' explanation is in the former's lack of precision, not in its logical form.

¹ Op. cit., pp. 264-5.

Hempel's analysis is designed to convince us that in so far as explanation is given in history, it is given, in spite of appearances to the contrary, on the covering law model. On one question, however, he professes himself "entirely neutral": whether explanation in history is a special kind, achieved, for example, by means of "specifically historical laws". It is to this question that another covering law theorist, Professor M. G. White, turns in a carefully argued article entitled 'Historical Explanation'.¹ Having registered his approval of Hempel's essential thesis, White asks: 'What, then, is the nature of specifically *historical* explanation?' And he goes on to consider various possibilities in the light of covering law theory.

One possibility which suggests itself is that the distinguishing mark of an historical explanation is reference to the past, i.e. "a historical explanation explains facts at one time by reference to facts prevailing at an earlier time". Thus one might distinguish between two kinds of laws which can perform the covering function: those which contain some reference to a lapse of time, and those which do not. But White argues that to define historical explanation in terms of the use of temporal laws only is to adopt too broad a criterion. For there are laws which we now rightly regard as belonging to one or other of the natural sciences which would have to be called historical if this test were accepted; and "we do not want our analysis to result in the statement that one explanation is both mechanical and historical".

In the hope of finding a more satisfactory criterion of 'historical' explanation by contrast with, for example, 'mechanical' or 'physical' or 'biological', White asks on what principle we ordinarily decide that explanations are of a certain kind, i.e. belong to a certain science. The distinction, he maintains, is made on the basis of the essential employment of technical terms native to the science concerned. Thus a chemical explanation is identified by the occurrence of 'element' words like 'hydrogen', and no explanation in which such terms do not occur essentially can be counted as specifically chemical. It is

¹ *Mind*, 1943, pp. 212-29.

necessary to say 'essentially' in order to rule out purely analytic truths accidentally employing technical terms, and also to allow for the fact that most sciences, because they are related to each other in a logical hierarchy, presuppose other sciences, and thus terms of the presupposed sciences occur (although 'unessentially') in the statements of the presupposing sciences. Physics, for instance, is presupposed by most other sciences; logic is presupposed by all, while itself presupposing none. The existence of historical explanations, therefore, depends on the existence of specifically historical terms; and any explanation in which such terms occur essentially will properly be regarded as an historical explanation.

But whereas the first criterion considered had the disadvantage of allowing too many explanations to be called 'historical', White doubts that *any* could qualify on the present one. For history is the polar opposite of logic in that it presupposes *all* the other sciences, and has *no* special technical terms of its own; they are all borrowed. Terms which may at first appear to be specifically historical ones, e.g. 'revolution', usually turn out to belong to the science of sociology. Like most positivists, and as Popper had already contended, White concludes that history differs from sociology only in applying rather than discovering the laws of social phenomena. The answer to the question: 'What is the nature of historical explanation?' is therefore: 'There are no such explanations.' The explanations which historians give, in so far as they are reputable, must be 'scientific' (and generally sociological) ones.

2. Reception by Philosophers and Historians

The statement of the covering law theory and its implications which has been given above is drawn from the writings of three contemporary philosophers who have been in the forefront of recent controversy in the philosophy of history. But, as I have already suggested, their view of the nature of explanation is far from being an isolated one, and something like it can, in fact, be found in the work of many American and British philosophers and social theorists, with and without

reference to the authors already mentioned. The theory might, indeed, be said to have achieved, in many quarters, the status of accepted doctrine.

Thus, according to Professor C. J. Ducasse, "explanation essentially consists in the offering of a hypothesis of fact, standing to the fact to be explained as a case of antecedent to case of consequent of some already known law of connection . . .".¹ According to Professor F. Kaufmann, "it is elliptical to speak of a cause of a given event without referring explicitly to the law in terms of which it is a cause of the event".² According to Professor R. B. Braithwaite, "to ask for the cause of an event is always to ask for a general law which applies to the particular event".³ Similar statements can be found in the work of many other writers, to some of whom reference will later be made. The unassailability of the model appears to have reached the point where an extreme version of it can be introduced apologetically into a symposium of the Aristotelian Society as "a rather obvious point to be made about causal explanation in general".⁴

Opposition to covering law theory, or at any rate to the *kind* of thinking about history which it represents, has come mainly from philosophers who could be called 'idealist'. The most uncompromising opponents simply declare 'the autonomy of history', claiming that the historian has no dealings whatever with general laws, and yet explains his subject-matter quite satisfactorily in his own way. If we ask for more details about the way explanations should proceed in history, we are likely to receive an answer drawn from a view of the peculiar nature of the historian's subject-matter. Thus Professor M. Oakeshott, in *Experience and Its Modes*, having emphasized the inexhaustible particularity, the uniqueness, of historical events, represents historical explanation as simply

¹ 'Explanation, Mechanism and Teleology', reprinted in Feigl and Sellars, *Readings in Philosophical Analysis*, p. 540.

² *The Methodology of the Social Sciences*, New York, 1944, p. 93.

³ *Op. cit.*, p. 2.

⁴ R. S. Peters, 'Motives and Causes', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supp. Vol.*, 1952, p. 141.

"a full account of change"—the most complete and detailed description of what is to be explained that the historian is capable of giving. For Oakeshott, not only has the notion of 'law' no place in historical explanation, but the category of 'cause' itself is "replaced by the exhibition of a world of events intrinsically related to one another in which no *lacuna* is tolerated".¹

In *The Idea of History* R. G. Collingwood dispenses with the notion of 'law' in the light of a different aspect of the historian's subject-matter: the fact that it is past human action, which has a 'thought-side'. In history "the object to be discovered is not the mere event but the thought expressed in it. To discover that thought is already to understand it."² It is Collingwood's contention that once the thought-side of the action is revealed, bringing the action under law can add nothing to our understanding of it. For "the value of generalization in natural science depends on the fact that the data of physical science are given by perception, and perceiving is not understanding". In the case of human actions, where direct understanding is possible, we therefore demand more than that intelligibility which comes from recognizing "the relations between general types".³ Like Oakeshott, Collingwood claims that explanation on the covering law model, if it were given in history, would be in one way or another inappropriate or out of place.

But few idealist writers—even the two unquestionably vigorous ones mentioned—have succeeded in putting their counter-argument in a form comparable in clarity and precision with that of their opponents, and their position has in recent years tended to go by default. There have, nevertheless, been some attempts to do justice to both sides, giving qualified acceptance to covering law theory, but seeking to modify it in the light of idealist doctrines. Thus Professor M. Mandelbaum, in *The Problem of Historical Knowledge*, although appearing to accept something like the covering law analysis of explanation, and a similar analysis of the concepts of 'relevance' and 'importance', at one crucial point insists

¹ Cambridge, 1953, p. 143. ² Oxford, 1946, p. 214. ³ *Op. cit.*, pp. 222-3.

that the historian's task is to exhibit events in their "actual determining relationships". And he denies that such "full causal explanation" is reducible without remainder to subsumption under covering law.¹

In *An Introduction to Philosophy of History* Mr. W. H. Walsh also argues for a compromise.² Against Collingwood's apparent claim that human actions are understood "in a single act of intuitive insight", Walsh points out that in order to grasp and understand the thought of historical agents we have to interpret historical evidence, "and this process of interpretation is one in which we make at least implicit reference to general truths". Unlike Collingwood and Oakeshott, Walsh recognizes a wide sphere of application for the covering law model in history; yet he makes it clear that he regards the laws implicit in the explanation of most individual actions in history as peculiar in important ways. What the historian brings to his study of the past, Walsh maintains, is a basic, non-technical knowledge of human nature—a kind of 'common sense'—which it is very difficult to regard as arrived at by any ordinary process of induction. For this would do "less than justice to the subtlety and depth of insight into the possibilities of human nature shown by the great historians".³

The reception of the model by historians themselves has also been divided. A few, like Professor R. M. Crawford, have hailed it with enthusiasm—less as a faithful reflection of the way historical inquiry proceeds than as an instrument of emancipation and progress: one more step in a century-long march "in the direction of making historical studies more scientific". In an article entitled 'History as a Science',⁴ having confessed that theoretical problems of his subject drove him to "turn for help to the philosophers", Crawford denies that we can ever speak of 'actual determining relationships' without assuming that the events concerned represent instances of regular relationships formulable as laws—

¹ New York, 1938, p. 14.

² London, 1951, chap. iii.

³ I shall show (in Chaps. II and V) that both Mandelbaum's and Walsh's views are suggestive of ways in which covering law theory requires modification.

⁴ *Historical Studies, Australia and New Zealand*, 1947, pp. 153-4.

although the prudence of an historian leads him to add that such a contention does not require the exact repetition of events. Crawford has no hesitation in using the model to assess the adequacy of explanations which historians have actually given, and he clearly expects a marked improvement in historical writing to result from a more general determination among historians to make the covering laws assumed by their explanations explicit.

The persuasive appeal of the model to reformers may also be seen in a remarkable bulletin published by the American Social Science Research Council, entitled *Theory and Practice in Historical Studies*.¹ This pamphlet outlines the conclusions reached by a committee of historians who had the temerity to call upon a philosopher, Professor S. Hook, for light on their subject. The essentials of covering law doctrine are plainly expounded in Hook's declaration: "An event or process is explained if it can be shown that it follows from a set of relevant antecedent events regarded as determining conditions. . . . [It] always involves the assumption of some general laws or statistical generalizations relating classes of phenomena, to one of which the event or process belongs."² The only peculiarities of explanation in history are said to be (1) that its subject-matter is confined to "human activity in social contexts", (2) that the laws involved are comparatively vague, and (3) that the historian's research techniques are autonomous, although the logic of evidence is not. Hook's account was incorporated into a final 'statement of faith' by his historical colleagues.

As a rule, however, historians tend to resist the model as in some way irrelevant to what they are trying to do. Unfortunately, they do not always make it clear why they think this is so. Some register their protest in metaphorical rather than argumentative terms. Thus Butterfield has deplored the attempt to write history on "geometrical patterns with clean

¹ *Bulletin No. 54*, New York, 1946.

² *Op. cit.*, p. 127. Hook is here outlining just one of two possible views, but we are left in little doubt that it is this one he accepts.

white spaces (where there ought to be a rich, thick undergrowth) between the lines".¹ And Trevelyan has insisted that Clio is a Muse, without showing precisely what is wrong with a 'scientific' approach.² Other historians, unable to deny that the model has a certain *a priori* plausibility, concede the logical point, and make its inapplicability to history only a matter of difficulty in practice. And, of course, there are always some who find it attractive to retreat to an older positivist view of the nature of historical inquiry: that it is simply not the historian's business to give explanations; his concern is only to describe and narrate. Such a view, it might be mentioned, does not usually prevent these same historians from offering perfectly satisfactory explanations in their un-theoretical moments. And the prevalence of explanatory words and expressions in what, in the preface to this book, I called 'ordinary historical writing', would in any case make the view a rather odd one.

It would be rash to try to read a great deal into the reactions of historians to the model. Practitioners are not always the best theorists about their own practice; and, in any case, the evidence is conflicting. Yet it appears to me highly suspicious that the model is accepted most readily by those who are admittedly dissatisfied with history as it is at present. Before joining in the demand for a revolution in historical method, it might be wise to insist on a more sustained attempt to show exactly how, and to what extent, the model does, or could, apply to the explanations historians already give. And in addition, it might be prudent to ask whether, if the model were strictly and deliberately applied, anything would be abandoned which is essential to what historians at present accept as explanation. Hempel and Popper have both offered hints and suggestions in this connexion; but it seems to me that a great deal more would need to be said before it could be claimed that a convincing case for the acceptance of covering law theory in history had been made.

¹ *The Englishman and his History*, Cambridge, 1944, p. 138.

² *Clio, A Muse*, London, 1930.

3. *A Defence of the Model*

In his recent book *The Nature of Historical Explanation* Mr. Patrick Gardiner has attempted to provide some of the sustained argument which covering law theory would seem to require if it is to make good its claim. Gardiner takes up the problem where Hempel left it; he recognizes the fact that an argument of some subtlety is needed, since it is not at all obvious that the model applies to historical cases. He maintains that it does so, despite appearances to the contrary.

The book is divided into four parts, in the first of which the covering law model is represented as revealing the logical structure of explanations given in both formal scientific inquiry and everyday life. According to Gardiner: "We explain our headaches, our insomnia, our good health, and so forth by correlating them with other happenings like sitting too long in the sun, drinking strong black coffee, and taking regular exercise, which have been observed to accompany the events and states to be explained. . . ." Scientific explanations differ from such common sense ones in requiring "a close structural analysis of the phenomena", and this shows itself in the use of technical concepts beyond the precision of the language of common sense. Yet the difference is only one of degree: "the explanation of the physicist and the explanation of the 'plain man' both depend upon observed correlations in experience."²

In Part II Gardiner prepares the ground for the contention that explanations in history are of the same general type, by considering and rejecting some familiar *a priori* objections based on peculiar views of the historian's subject-matter. This very useful discussion is intended to shake up common prejudices and dispose the reader to consider on its merits the positive argument for the model. Of four ways of arguing for 'the autonomy of history' which are thus attacked, three are of particular interest here.³

¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 5.

² *Op. cit.*, p. 24.

³ The fourth argument is that history is, by definition, concerned with events that are past, and past events cannot be known as present ones can (and, *a fortiori*, cannot be explained)—a view attributed to Oakeshott.

The first is that historical events are unique and hence unclassifiable—a view attributed to Croce. If true, this would rule out the possibility of bringing them under general laws at all, for laws govern types or classes of events. In meeting this objection, Gardiner does not deny that there is a certain point in saying that “the historian concentrates upon the event in its *unique individuality*”; but he does deny that “historical events possess some absolute uniqueness which necessitates their being known and explained in an especial way”.¹ Indeed, he regards it as obvious that, since the historian uses language to refer to the events he studies, he does in fact manage to classify them. The *a priori* objection that he cannot do this must therefore be dismissed.

The second objection is that historical events are, or involve, thoughts, and thoughts cannot be brought under law—a view attributed to Collingwood. Once again Gardiner admits that the objection has some force, for in history “we view human behaviour not only in its reactive aspects, but also under the aspect of being purposive, calculated, planned”.² And when we do this, he agrees, we do not look for causes or bring the actions under law. But although “the two forms of explanation are different [and] it is a mistake to try to conflate them”, we should not conclude that the giving of a non-causal explanation rules out the giving of a causal or law-covered one. Nor should we allow ourselves to think that the ‘insides’ of actions which the historian seeks to discover are “queer objects, invisible engines that make the wheels go round”. For we understand actions in the non-causal way largely by taking account of overt behaviour, and our procedure in giving the explanation (which Gardiner discusses further in Part IV) amounts to subsuming what was done, if not under a ‘law’, then at least under a ‘lawlike’ statement: a statement implying that the agent was disposed to do things of a certain sort.

The third objection is that historical events are irreducibly rich and complex, so that, whether there really are any regu-

¹ Op. cit., pp. 40, 42.

² Op. cit., p. 47.

larities in them or not, we cannot discern any. This view is attributed to Fisher, and perhaps also to Bury. And Gardiner agrees that when we come to consider events like the English, French, and Russian revolutions, it is tempting to conclude that “the ‘things’ or events with which history deals are too big and unwieldy, too complex and various, to be generalized about”. They seem to “overflow the edges of any precise classification”.¹ But we must not imagine that it is a peculiarity of the events themselves which thus sets limits to our ability to generalize. For there is a linguistic side to the problem; terms like ‘revolution’, which indicate what it is we are to generalize about, are “accommodating terms, able to cover a vast number of events falling within an indefinitely circumscribed range”.² The ‘language of historical descriptions’ consequently does not admit of the framing of precise generalizations. But this is not at all the same as concluding that historical events cannot be generalized about at all.

Such a summary does scant justice to Gardiner’s discussion of some very common and troublesome opinions about history. Even where the argument itself is rather sketchy, its approach is often illuminating. Gardiner does not try to *refute* these various philosophical objections outright; his aim is rather to show that, taken in an ordinary sense, the propositions which formulate them express truisms about history, the historian’s interests and his problems, and that they need not be interpreted as setting up metaphysical barriers against the use of laws in explanation. But he wishes, of course, to establish more than this negative thesis. The remainder of the book is therefore devoted to showing that the covering law model *does* function in history—indeed, that it *must* do so.

As might be expected, in view of his treatment of the objections noted, Gardiner’s positive account goes considerably beyond Hempel’s in making concessions to those who object to the model as unrealistic. His major departure is in allowing a second type of explanation, which, far from being ‘pseudo’,

¹ Op. cit., p. 58.

² Op. cit., p. 61.

is perfectly proper when we are concerned with human conduct of a purposive rather than a 'reactive' kind. Having denied that "an explanation of the form, 'x did y because he wanted z. . .', refers to the existence of a causal relation between two events", Gardiner goes on to argue that the "function of the 'because'" in such explanation is to set the agent's action "within a pattern, the pattern of his normal behaviour".¹ The particular action is explained in terms of a dispositional characteristic of the agent, and this, he admits, cannot strictly be regarded as subsuming what was done under a covering general law.

It seems to me that the departure from the covering law model here is a major one, both in what it asserts and what it suggests. Gardiner does, it is true, represent dispositional explanation as not a very serious falling-away from covering law respectability. The explanatory statement which attributes the dispositional characteristic to the agent is at least 'lawlike'. But although he does not emphasize this, a logical discontinuity is nevertheless recognized in the field of explanation which other covering law theorists have been most anxious to avoid. Such an admission can scarcely fail to strip the model of a little of its pristine, *a priori* plausibility—one of the barriers to getting serious consideration for alternative accounts. It invites the question: 'If one, why not many such logical differences, provided that recognition of them is forced upon us by a consideration of the way historians' explanations go?' Gardiner does not explore such possibilities; the dispositional analysis which he gives in Part IV is hurried and schematic by comparison with his earlier discussion. His chief concern appears to be to narrow the front which exponents of the model require to defend, and then to set about defending it.

Yet even in the remaining cases, where a covering law is held to function in any given explanation, Gardiner has much to add (in Part III) to Hempel's remarks about the 'looseness' of the law in historical contexts. He points out that "an event

¹ Especially *op. cit.*, pp. 124-5.

in history is frequently not so obviously a case of a given type as is an event treated by science or by common sense".¹ He calls our attention to the fact that the historian's explanatory statement often comes as a kind of summing up, after the real work of the explanation has been done, so that that statement itself, if it is to be properly understood, must be referred back to the details on which it rests.² And he maintains that the word 'cause' itself, which appears in so many explanations given by historians, is vague in its own peculiar way. In ordinary life, "to give the cause of an event is to select one from a number of conditions"—notably "that condition which enables us to produce or prevent that event";³ and in history, too, the word 'cause' has a "contextual reference".

For these and other reasons, the function of covering laws will appear very different in scientific and historical cases. In history, Gardiner warns us, the laws will have a number of 'levels of imprecision'.⁴ The historian, as we saw, uses ordinary language; and the component terms of his laws, unlike the concepts of science, are 'loose and porous'. White was thus misguided to look for 'specifically historical terms'; history employs none—not even sociological ones—in the great majority of cases. In addition, there is often a wide *ceteris paribus* clause to be read into the historian's laws, leaving a certain play between law and case. Indeed, when the laws are formulated with sufficient care, it may be found necessary to include in them some such qualifying term as 'usually'; for it is not "implied that they *always* hold". Small wonder then that in history there is "always a risk in moving from the general hypothetical or 'law' to the particular case, the risk that in the particular case factors unknown to us may have been present".⁵

Confronted with Gardiner's analysis, a true positivist might very well say: 'So much the worse for history as it is presently studied'; and he might intensify his demand that the subject be made more 'scientific'. But Gardiner insists that it is a mistake,

¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 87.

⁴ *Op. cit.*, pp. 93-94.

² *Op. cit.*, p. 90.

³ *Op. cit.*, p. 101.

⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 92.

and damaging to historical writing, to draw too close a parallel between explanation in history and in the formal sciences. For we do not always want to talk about the world the way a physicist does; in history the precision of scientific language is out of place. The covering law model is no more than a kind of logical 'marker' or ideal, to which actual explanations in history can be shown to approximate to a limited degree. The extent to which they do so depends upon the interests of historians, and these not only allow, but positively enjoin, a general looseness of structure of the kind Gardiner explores. To those who urge that historians speak more precisely, and thus become more 'scientific', Gardiner recommends the functional view of language: a view which holds that the only 'right' way of talking is the way which enables the speaker to get on with the job in hand.

4. *Aim of the Present Discussion*

Gardiner's discussion of the nature of explanation in history seems to me a most useful one. It puts the case for the covering law model with a moderation clearly induced by a desire to illuminate what the historian actually does. It candidly admits that the model "may suggest an artificial picture of what the historian is doing, an over-simplified, too tidy account".¹ No doubt Gardiner advances far enough beyond the cruder forms of the theory to produce an analysis which, in many respects, historians might themselves find illuminating. Yet even in allowing a second type of explanation, he insists that it, too, is analysable in terms of some kind of 'regularity', and in abandoning the claim that history is 'scientific' in any technical sense, he does not give up, but only blurs, the logical pattern of explanation which his predecessors claimed to derive from scientific procedure.

For all his concessions to the peculiarities of historical practice, I think it is clear that Gardiner remains, in essentials, a covering law theorist. His modifications of the model, like

those allowed by Popper and Hempel, are all designed to show that, even in the most unlikely cases, the real force or point of the explanations which historians offer is only to be brought out by emphasizing their resemblance to the covering law ideal. There is, of course, nothing necessarily vicious about approaching the subject with the question: 'To what extent do actual explanations in history approximate to the structure of the covering law model?' But the danger of doing this will obviously be that more will sometimes be read into an historical example than is actually there, and, just as unfortunate, that important features which *are* there will pass unnoticed. In spite of his repeated declarations of the historian's right to determine his own way of dealing with his subject-matter, it seems to me that Gardiner has not escaped the dangers of such a procedure.

In the chapters to follow I shall argue that if we are to produce a helpful account of the logic of explanation in history, more is required than a mere 'loosening up' of the covering law model. This model is, in fact, so misleading that it ought to be *abandoned* as a basic account of what it is to give an explanation. This is not to say that no trace of it will be found at all in the explanations historians normally give, for it is an odd philosophical doctrine which can be shown to be completely false. But the traces, I shall argue, are almost always misdescribed. To bring these traces into proper perspective, I shall suggest that we constantly ask ourselves the question: 'What is the point here of saying that a general law has an indispensable function in the explanation given?'

The general course of my argument will be as follows.¹ In Chapter II, I shall investigate the notion of an 'implicit' appeal to law as it is used by covering law theorists; and I shall deny that there *need* be anything properly so-called in an historian's explanation. The discussion of this question will force a reconsideration of the problem of the uniqueness of the

¹ As the above chapter outline will suggest, I try, as far as possible, to discuss various reasons for dissatisfaction with the model independently. Thus failure to be convinced by the argument of any single chapter should not be taken as indicating that the general case against the covering law theory has broken down.

¹ Op. cit., p. 88.

objects of historical study, and of the role of the judgement of the historian in giving an explanation. In Chapter III, I shall go on to ask what should in general be said about cases where a covering law is known, and perhaps even mentioned; and I shall argue that appealing to the law in such cases is not *ipso facto* explaining what falls under it. This argument will direct our attention to the question of the logical type of the term 'explanation'. For it will be an essential part of my general thesis that positivists have wrongly taken it to be a term of formal logic, whereas it is really a pragmatic one. Further light will be thrown on this pragmatic dimension in subsequent chapters.

In Chapter IV, I shall consider the logical structure of specifically causal explanations in history. Besides expanding Gardiner's very useful discussion of the 'contextual reference' of the word 'cause', I shall try to show why knowledge of causal laws is especially irrelevant to the giving of causal explanations; and I shall suggest that it is often the erroneous view of causal analysis which the covering law theory tends to support which lies behind campaigns for the elimination of causal language from historical writing altogether. In Chapter V, I shall turn to the restricted range of explanations—mainly of individual human actions—which Gardiner calls 'non-causal', and for which he offers a dispositional rather than a strictly law-covered analysis. My argument here will be that most of our explanations of such actions are indeed of a special logical type, which I call 'rational', but that the covering law doctrine is especially beside the point when applied to such cases—on both its necessary and sufficient condition interpretations. And the peculiarities of such explanations cannot be brought out by dispositional analysis either, although dispositional explanation; it will be admitted, constitutes a special type whose relation to rational and causal explanations has sometimes been misunderstood.

Finally, in Chapter VI, a type of explanation will be discussed—rather more briefly—which stands quite outside the normal 'Why? Because . . .' pattern, and whose logical struc-

ture departs quite radically from the covering law model. Such departures, I shall argue, can only be appreciated if we attend closely to the questions which the explanations concerned may be regarded as answering.

To bring out the nature of my disagreement with Gardiner's modified covering law theory as sharply as possible, I shall from time to time deliberately use examples which he has already discussed. I have no desire, however, to exaggerate the extent of our disagreement, or to deny the obvious debt which my discussion owes to his. And I should like to express substantial agreement with him about the *kind* of inquiry needed. Our concern is with the logic of historical thinking, interpreting 'logic' in the broad sense made familiar by contemporary analytic philosophers. It is not epistemology or psychology, as some opponents of the covering law theory appear to believe. Gardiner, himself, having drawn attention to the historian's use of causal and near-causal expressions, formulates the nature of the task quite satisfactorily in these words: "We must try to discover what in general are the criteria which govern the historian's usage of expressions like these, and under what conditions it is justifiable to say that a 'historical connection' exists between two events or states of affairs."¹ And again: "We must . . . consider what it is that historians are doing when they speak of two events as causally related to one another, and under what conditions it is deemed legitimate in history to say that two facts are connected."² Like Gardiner's book, the present discussion endeavours to elicit some of the complicated criteria of 'giving an explanation' accepted and acceptable in historical studies. And it is my contention that covering law theory fails to give them.

¹ Op. cit., p. 70.

² Op. cit., pp. 80–81.