V

THE RATIONALE OF ACTIONS

1. *Historical Understanding as 'Empathetic'*

My discussion of the covering law theory up to this point has been concerned chiefly with its applicability to explanations given of fairly large-scale historical events or conditions. I now want to direct attention to a narrower range of cases: the kind of explanation historians generally give of the *actions* of those individuals who are important enough to be mentioned in the course of historical narrative. It will be my thesis in this chapter that the explanation of individual human behaviour as it is usually given in history has features which make the covering law model peculiarly inept.

My argument in Chapter II was, in part, an attempt to clarify the sense in which historians' explanations can be, and often are, given of unique events: a doctrine commonly found in the writings of certain idealist philosophers of history. What I now wish to say may be regarded as an attempt to rehabilitate to some extent a second traditional doctrine of idealist philosophers of history which Gardiner has attacked at length: the view that the objects of historical study are fundamentally different from those, for example, of the natural sciences, because they are the actions of beings like ourselves; and that even if (for the sake of argument) we allow that natural events may be explained by subsuming them under empirical laws, it would still be true that this procedure is inappropriate in history. Sometimes such a view will be supported by the belief that human actions—at any rate the ones we call 'free'—do not fall under law at all. Sometimes it will be alleged only that even if they do fall under law, discovery of the law would still not enable us to understand them in the sense proper to this special subject-matter. It is the

second of these claims which I especially want to consider here.

The doctrine is commonly expressed with the aid of a characteristic set of terms. To understand a human action, it will be said, it is necessary for the inquirer somehow to discover its 'thought-side'; it is not sufficient merely to know the pattern of overt behaviour. The historian must *penetrate* behind appearances, achieve *insight* into the situation, *identify* himself sympathetically with the protagonist, *project* himself imaginatively into his situation. He must *revive*, *re-enact*, *re-think*, *re-experience* the hopes, fears, plans, desires, views, intentions, &c., of those he seeks to understand. To explain action in terms of covering law would be to achieve, at most, an external kind of understanding. The historian, by the very nature of his self-imposed task, seeks to do more than this.

It is worth noticing that historians themselves, and not just professional philosophers of history, often describe their task in these terms. Professor Butterfield is representative of a large group of his professional colleagues when he insists that "the only understanding we ever reach in history is but a refinement, more or less subtle and sensitive, of the difficult—and sometimes deceptive—process of imagining oneself in another person's place". And elsewhere in *History and Human Relations*, he writes:

> Our traditional historical writing . . . has refused to be satisfied with any merely causal or stand-offish attitude towards the personalities of the past. It does not treat them as mere things, or just measure such features of them as the scientist might measure; and it does not content itself with merely reporting about them in the way an external observer would do. It insists that the story cannot be told correctly unless we see the personalities from the inside, feeling with them as an actor might feel the part he is playing—thinking their thoughts over again and sitting in the position not of the observer but of the doer of the action. If it is argued that this is impossible—as indeed it is—not merely does it still remain the thing to aspire to, but in any case the historian must put himself in the place of the historical personage, must feel his predicament, must think as though he were that man. Without this art not only is it impossible to tell the story correctly but it is impossible to interpret the very documents on which the reconstruction depends. Traditional

historical writing emphasizes the importance of sympathetic imagination for the purpose of getting inside human beings. We may even say that this is part of the science of history for it produces communicable results—the insight of one historian may be ratified by scholars in general, who then give currency to the interpretation that is produced....[1]

Among covering law logicians there is an 'official' answer to philosophers or historians who talk in this way about the peculiarities of 'historical understanding'. The answer is that although there is something right about it, the element of truth in such an account is not a point of logic; it is a mixture of psychological description and methodological precept. As a psychological description of the historian's state of mind when he succeeds in explaining the action of one of his characters, the notion of 'empathy' or 'imaginative understanding', as it is often called, will be allowed some merit—although it will be represented as involving us all too easily in the philosophical error of thinking that merely having certain experiences, or thinking certain thoughts similar to those of the historical agents, itself constitutes understanding or explaining. Similarly, as a suggestion as to how to go about discovering what the agent's motives were, the 'empathy' theory will be admitted to have a certain methodological point—although the reservation will be made that the principle involved often leads the investigator astray. Professor Hempel puts the position succinctly in the following passage:

> The historian, we are told, imagines himself in the place of the persons involved in the events which he wants to explain; he tries to realize as completely as possible the circumstances under which they acted, and the motives which influenced their actions; and by this imaginary self-identification with his heroes, he arrives at an understanding and thus at an adequate explanation of the events with which he is concerned.
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> This method of empathy is, no doubt, frequently applied by laymen and by experts in history. But it does not in itself constitute an explanation; it rather is essentially a heuristic device; its function is to suggest certain psychological hypotheses which might serve as explanatory principles in the case under consideration. Stated in crude terms, the idea underlying this function is the following: the historian tries to realize how he himself would act under the given conditions, and under

[1] pp. 145–6. See also pp. 116–17.

> the particular motivations of his heroes; he tentatively generalizes his findings into a general rule and uses the latter as an explanatory principle in accounting for the actions of the persons involved. Now, this procedure may sometimes prove heuristically helpful; but its use does not guarantee the soundness of the historical explanation to which it leads. The latter rather depends upon the factual correctness of the empirical generalizations which the method of understanding may have suggested.
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> Nor is the use of this method indispensable for historical explanation. A historian may, for example, be incapable of feeling himself into the role of a paranoiac historic personality, and yet be able to explain certain of his actions; notably by reference to the principles of abnormal psychology. Thus whether the historian is or is not in a position to identify himself with his historical hero, is irrelevant for the correctness of his explanation; what counts, is the soundness of the general hypotheses involved, no matter whether they were suggested by empathy, or by a strictly behaviouristic procedure.[1]

Now I do not wish to deny that there is any value at all in this sort of objection. But I think it important to show that the argument does not cut as deeply as covering law theorists commonly assume. For in recognizing the mixture of psychological and methodological elements in many statements of the idealist position, and in denying that these amount to an analysis of logical structure, these theorists fail to notice what it is about explanations of human actions in history which make the idealists want to say what they do—albeit in a quasi-psychological and quasi-methodological way. And what is left out, I wish to maintain, should properly be taken into account in a *logical* analysis of explanation as it is given in history. I shall argue that idealist theory partially, and perhaps defectively, formulates a certain pragmatic criterion operating in explanations of action given by historians, and that when this is ignored, we are quite properly puzzled as to why certain alleged explanations, which meet the covering law requirements, would be dismissed by historians as unsatisfactory—perhaps even as 'no explanation at all'.

The discussion to follow may be regarded in part as an

[1] Op. cit., p. 467. A similar argument is used by Crawford, op. cit., p. 157; R. S. Peters, op. cit., p. 143; Gardiner, op. cit., p. 129; A. Danto, in 'Mere Chronicle and History Proper', *Journal of Philosophy*, 1953, p. 176.

attempt to 'make sense' of what Collingwood, in particular, has to say about historical understanding—and I make no apology for this. But although some reference will be made to dicta of his, I shall not offer any close textual discussion of his account. I shall try, rather, to bring out independently, by reference to examples, features which covering law theory seems to me to miss, going on thereafter to discuss likely misunderstandings of, and objections to, the logical point which appears to emerge out of such an examination.

2. *Explaining and Justifying Actions*

The following extract from G. M. Trevelyan's *The English Revolution* is typical of a wide range of explanations of individual actions to be found in ordinary historical writing. In the course of an account of the invasion of England by William of Orange, Trevelyan asks: "Why did Louis make the greatest mistake of his life in withdrawing military pressure from Holland in the summer of 1688?" His answer is:

> He was vexed with James, who unwisely chose this moment of all, to refuse the help and advice of his French patron, upon whose friendship he had based his whole policy. But Louis was not entirely passion's slave. No doubt he felt irritation with James, but he also calculated that, even if William landed in England, there would be civil war and long troubles, as always in that factious island. Meanwhile, he could conquer Europe at leisure. "For twenty years," says Lord Acton, "it had been his desire to neutralize England by internal broils, and he was glad to have the Dutch out of the way (in England) while he dealt a blow at the Emperor Leopold (in Germany)." He thought "it was impossible that the conflict between James and William should not yield him an opportunity." This calculation was not as absurd as it looks after the event. It was only defeated by the unexpected solidity of a new type of Revolution.[1]

What Trevelyan here makes quite explicit is that, when we ask for the explanation of an action, what we very often want is a reconstruction of the agent's *calculation* of means to be adopted toward his chosen end in the light of the circumstances in which he found himself. To explain the action we need to know what considerations convinced him that he should act as he did.

[1] pp. 105–6.

But the notion of discovering the agent's calculation, it must be admitted, takes us no more than one preliminary step towards a satisfactory analysis of such explanations; and it may in itself be misleading. It must not be assumed, for instance, that the agent 'calculated' in the sense of deriving by strict deductive reasoning the practical conclusion he drew—i.e. that the various considerations are elements in a calculus. Indeed, Trevelyan's explanation provides an obvious example to the contrary. Nor should we assume that the explanatory calculation must have been recited in propositional form, either aloud or silently—a notion which one might be forgiven for extracting out of Collingwood's discussion of the way thought must be re-enacted by historians in order to understand intelligent, purposive actions. Not all high-grade actions are performed deliberately in the sense that they are undertaken with a plan consciously preformulated.

Indeed, it is tempting to say that in such cases there is *no* calculation to be *re*constructed by the historian. But such an admission need not affect the main point; for in so far as we say an action is purposive at all, no matter at what level of conscious deliberation, there is a calculation which could be constructed for it: the one the agent would have gone through if he had had time, if he had not seen what to do in a flash, if he had been called upon to account for what he did after the event, &c. And it is by eliciting some such calculation that we explain the action. It might be added that if the agent is to understand his *own* actions, i.e. after the event, he may have to do so by constructing a calculation in exactly the same way, although at the time he recited no propositions to himself. No doubt there are special dangers involved in such construction after the fact. But although we may have to examine very critically any particular example, the point is that when we do consider ourselves justified in accepting an explanation of an individual action, it will most often assume the general *form* of an agent's calculation.

Since the calculation gives what we should normally call the agent's *reasons* for acting as he did, I shall refer

hereafter to this broad class of explanations as 'rational'. It should be clear that this use of the expression 'rational explanation' is a narrower one than is often found in philosophical and semi-philosophical literature. It is sometimes said, for instance, that all science, all systematic inquiry, seeks a rational explanation for what is observed, where all that is meant is an explanation which takes account of all the facts considered puzzling, and which does not violate, say, the canons of coherence and induction. I intend something much more restricted than this: an explanation which displays the *rationale* of what was done.

The goal of such explanation is to show that what was done was the thing to have done for the reasons given, rather than merely the thing that is done on such occasions, perhaps in accordance with certain laws (loose or otherwise). The phrase 'thing to have done' betrays a crucially important feature of explanations in terms of agent calculations—a feature quite different from any we have noticed so far. For the infinitive 'to do' here functions as a value term. I wish to claim therefore that there is an element of *appraisal* of what was done in such explanations; that what we want to know when we ask to have the action explained is in what way it was *appropriate*. In the ordinary course of affairs, a demand for explanation is often recognized to be at the same time a challenge to the agent to produce either justification or excuse for what was done. In history, too, I want to argue, it will often be found impossible to bring out the point of what is offered as explanation unless the overlapping of these notions, when it is human actions we are interested in, is explicitly recognized.

Once again, however, I must be on guard against overstating the point; for I do not wish to imply that anything that is explained on the rational model is thereby certified *without qualification* as the right, or proper, or intelligent thing to have done. In saying that the explanation must exhibit what was done as appropriate or justified it is always necessary to add the philosopher's proviso: 'in a sense.'

The sense in question may be clarified if we note a scale

along which rational explanations can be ranged. The scale falls away from the simple case in which we can say: 'I find his action perfectly intelligible; he did exactly as I should have done.' It is a small step from such a case to one where we can understand an action when we see that it is what we should agree was the thing to do in view of the agent's peculiar circumstances. In such a case the explanation would consist of an account of these circumstances; they are the missing data which permit the construction of a calculation certifying the action as appropriate. Sometimes, of course, the agent is found to have been mistaken about the facts—including (as Trevelyan's example of Louis XIV shows) his views about what the results of certain lines of action will be. The agent is thus mistaken about the nature of his circumstances; yet his action can still be explained in the rational way so long as by bringing his erroneous beliefs to bear, the calculation can be satisfactorily constructed. It may also be necessary, at times, to take note explicitly of the agent's purposes, which may be quite different from the ones which the investigator would have had in the same circumstances, or even in the circumstances the agent envisaged. And the calculation may also have to take into account certain peculiar principles of the agent; for the action is rationally explained if it is in accordance with the agent's principles—no matter what we think of these.

There are thus gradations of rational explanation, depending on the amount of 'foreign' data which the investigator must bring in to complete the calculation: beliefs, purposes, principles, &c., of the agent which are different from those we might have assumed in absence of evidence to the contrary. Rational explanation may be regarded as an attempt to reach a kind of logical equilibrium at which point an action is *matched* with a calculation. A demand for explanation arises when the equilibrium is upset—when from the 'considerations' obvious to the investigator it is impossible to see the point of what was done. The function of the historian's explanatory story will in many cases be to sketch in the corrections to these 'obvious' considerations which require to be made if the

reader is to be able to say: 'Now I understand what he was about.'[1]

In the light of this account, it should be clear how restricted is the sense in which a rational explanation, as I use the term here, must show that what was done was the appropriate or right thing to have done. It is not necessary for the historian to show that the agent had reason for what he did; it is sufficient for explanation to show that he had reasons. But the element of appraisal remains in that what the historian declares to have been the agent's reasons must really *be* reasons (from the agent's point of view). To record what the agent *said* his reasons were would not be enough to provide a rational explanation unless the cogency of such reported reasons could be appreciated by the historian, when any peculiar beliefs, purposes, or principles of the agent were taken into account. Reported reasons, if they are to be explanatory in the rational way, must be *good* reasons at least in the sense that *if* the situation had been as the agent envisaged it (whether or not we, from our point of vantage, concur in his view of it), then what was done would have been the thing to have done. The historian must be able to 'work' the agent's calculation.

3. *The Point of the 'Identification' Metaphor*

If my account of rational explanation is correct, what should we say about the view that historical understanding is 'empathetic'? It seems to me that our being able to range rational explanations along a scale in the way described above gives a real point to the 'projection' metaphors used by empathy theorists. Perhaps it is because the scale has been either ignored or misunderstood that what such theorists have said has been so easily written off as obvious but uninteresting, or as interesting but dangerous.

Covering law logicians commonly speak of empathy as a 'methodological dodge'. And it might, I suppose, be claimed that if an old, practised historian were to say to a novice: 'You will never understand the way medieval knights behaved

[1] See note C, p. 171.

unless you drop your 20th century prejudices and try to see things from their point of view', he *may* be telling the novice how to get on with his job, and thus be making a point which might be called 'methodological'. But I cannot believe that what the old hand offers his young colleague is (in Hempel's words) "a heuristic device" whose function is "to suggest certain psychological hypotheses which might serve as explanatory principles in the case under consideration". As Hempel goes on to explain, by this he means that the historian, since he lacks empirically tested psychological laws which fit, say, the behaviour of medieval knights, must do something about repairing the deficiency if he is ever to give an explanation of knightly activities; for according to the covering law theory there is no explanation without empirical laws. Clearly the historian, especially the novice, is in no position to work over the whole field himself in search of the required laws. So, according to Hempel, he takes a short cut; he imagines himself in the knight's position, asks himself what *he* would have done, generalizes the answer as an empirical law covering knights (i.e. from a single imaginary case), and in this way satisfies the logical requirements of the model.

Hempel warns us, of course, that the use of the 'device' does not "guarantee the soundness of the historical explanation to which it leads", which depends rather "upon the factual correctness of the empirical generalizations which the method of understanding may have suggested". That is, we may presume, further empirical confirmation of the generalization must come in before we can regard the explanation as anything more than an inspired guess. In Hempel's terminology, the generalization is only a "hypothesis" until it has received the sort of empirical confirmation and testing that any respectable scientific law must undergo, losing in the process the marks of its Athena-like origin.

In the light of what was said in the previous section, it should be clear how misleading this is as an account of 'empathetic understanding'. No doubt there *is* a methodological side to the doctrine; and it might be formulated in some such

way as: 'Only by putting yourself in the agent's position can you *find out* why he did what he did.' Here the suggestion is admittedly that by an imaginative technique we shall discover some *new information*—the agent's motives or reasons for acting. When Collingwood says that historical understanding consists of penetrating to the thought-side of actions—discovering the thought and nothing further—the temptation to interpret this in the methodological way is understandably strong. But there is another way in which the doctrine can be formulated: 'Only by putting yourself in the agent's position can you *understand* why he did what he did.' The point of the 'projection' metaphor is, in this case, more plausibly interpreted as a logical one. Its function is not to remind us of *how we come to know* certain facts, but to formulate, however tentatively, certain *conditions which must be satisfied* before a historian is prepared to say: 'Now I have the explanation.'

To dismiss 'empathy' as a mere 'methodological dodge' is to assume, falsely, that all there is to notice when rational explanations are given is a second-rate method of obtaining the same sort of result as can be obtained more reliably by direct attempts to subsume what is to be explained under an empirical covering law. But, as I have tried to show, at least part of what is meant by talking about the 'need to project', &c., is not achievable at all by the method recommended by covering law theorists. To accept Hempel's argument against 'empathy' is to obliterate a distinction between explanation types: a distinction between representing something as the thing generally done, and representing it as the appropriate thing to have done. Thus, when Hempel, after the passage quoted, goes on to say: "The kind of understanding thus conveyed must be clearly separated from scientific understanding", I have no objection to make, provided that by 'scientific understanding' is meant 'knowing to fall under an empirical law'. But Hempel's account of the alternative is quite unsatisfactory. For 'empathetic understanding', interpreted as 'rational explanation', is *not* a matter of "presenting the phenomena in question as somehow 'plausible' or 'natural' to us . . . by means of attractively worded metaphors".

No doubt the widespread resistance to admitting the need to cite anything more than antecedent conditions and a general law in explaining actions owes something to the air of mystery surrounding the language in which 'empathy' theory is often framed: 'projection', 'identification', 'imagination', 'insight', 'intuition', &c. Such words arouse the suspicion that, if the conditions of the covering law theory are not met, it will be necessary to claim that the historian's explanation somehow goes beyond the limits of empirical inquiry into the realm of the unverifiable. As Gardiner puts it, historians often seem to be credited with "an additional power of knowing which allows them to 'penetrate into' the minds of the subjects of their study and take, as it were, psychological X-ray photographs".[1] And in the bulletin of the American Social Science Research Council already referred to, historians are warned against a view of 'historical understanding' supposed to be "achieved not by introducing general laws or relevant antecedent events, but by an act of 'intuition', 'imaginative identification', 'empathy' or 'valuation' which makes the historical occurrence plausible or intelligible", and whose adequacy is determined by "a self-certifying insight".[2] To allow the legitimacy of empathy appears to many of its opponents as the granting of a licence to eke out scanty evidence with imaginative filler.

It is therefore worth my denying explicitly that what I have called rational explanation is in any damaging sense beyond empirical inquiry. As I have pointed out already, it has an inductive, empirical side, for we build up to explanatory equilibrium *from the evidence*. To get inside Disraeli's shoes the historian does not simply ask himself: 'What would I have done?'; he reads Disraeli's dispatches, his letters, his speeches, &c.—and not with the purpose of discovering antecedent conditions falling under some empirically validated law, but rather in the hope of appreciating the problem as Disraeli saw it. The

[1] Op. cit., p. 128.

[2] *Bulletin No. 54*, p. 128.

attempt to provide rational explanation is thus—if you like the term—'scientific' explanation in a broad sense; there is no question of the investigator letting his imagination run riot. Indeed, many 'empathy' theorists have expressly guarded against such a misinterpretation of their views. To Butterfield, for instance, historical understanding is not a deliberate commission of the sin of anachronism; it is a "process of emptying oneself in order to catch the outlook and feelings of men not like-minded with oneself".[1]

It is true, of course, that the *direction* of inquiry in the explanation of actions is generally from what the inquirer presumes the relevant agent calculation to be—using his own, or his society's conception of rational purposes and principles—to what he discovers to be the peculiar data of the historical agent: a direction suggested by the scale already indicated. In view of this, Butterfield's admonition to 'empty ourselves' is a little sweeping. In achieving rational explanation of an action we do project—but we project from our own point of view. In each case, the inclusion of 'foreign' data in the calculation requires positive evidence that the agent was *not* like-minded with us. The historian does not build up to explanatory equilibrium from scratch. But this is far from admitting the covering law objection that the whole direction of the inquiry amounts to a vicious methodology. The procedure is self-corrective.

There is thus no reason to think that what I am calling 'rational' explanations are put forward as self-evidently true, as some philosophers who talk of 'insight' may seem to imply. Collingwood has sometimes been thought to provide justification for those who attack empathy theory on this account—e.g. when he represents the understanding of an action as an immediate leap to the discovery of its 'inside', without the aid of any general laws, and (it may appear) without the use of any inductive reasoning at all.[2] But it is always possible that a

[1] Op. cit., p. 146.

[2] e.g. "When [the historian] knows what happened, he already knows why it happened" (*The Idea of History*, p. 214).

mistake has been made in the inductive reasoning which provided the factual information for the calculation. It is always possible that further data may come in which will upset the logical equilibrium—perhaps evidence that the agent did not know something which it was at first thought he did. The ability of the historian to go through what he takes to be a relevant calculation does not guarantee the correctness of the explanation given; correct *form* is never a guarantee of correct *content*. But this is nothing more than the normal hazard of any empirical inquiry.

4. *Generalizations and Principles of Action*

Some exponents of the covering law model, while accepting the thesis of the two preceding sections, may object that this only amounts to recognizing an additional condition of a pragmatic sort which explanations must often satisfy in ordinary historical writing. It may be held, therefore, that what I say about rational explanation affects the claims of covering law theory only on its sufficient condition side. It seems to me, however, that in cases where we want to elicit the rationale of what was done, there are special reasons for regarding the model as false or misleading on its necessary condition side as well. For in an important sense, rational explanation falls short of, as well as goes beyond, subsuming a case under a general empirical law.

Any argument to the effect that a satisfactory or complete rational explanation must subsume what is explained under an empirically ascertainable 'regularity' depends on treating the data of the agent's calculation as 'antecedent conditions' (no doubt a very complicated set). It will be said that no matter what *else* is said about these conditions, they must be data from which what was done could have been predicted; and that the only difficulties we should encounter in trying to formulate the implicit covering law linking these to actions of the kind performed would be the ones discussed in Chapter II above (which I propose to ignore here). If we say: 'Disraeli attacked Peel because Peel was ruining the landed class', we

mean *inter alia* that anyone like Disraeli in certain respects would have done the same thing in a situation similar in certain respects—the respects in question being discovered by pressing for amplification of the single reason given.

Now this objection is an important one, because its plausibility arises out of a genuine characteristic of rational explanation which ought to be made clear. For it is quite true that 'reasons for acting' as well as 'conditions for predicting' have a kind of generality or universality. If y is a good reason for A to do x, then y would be a good reason for anyone sufficiently like A to do x under sufficiently similar circumstances. But this universality of reasons is unlike the generality of an empirically validated law in a way which makes it especially hazardous to say that by giving a rational explanation, an historian commits himself to the truth of a corresponding law. For if a negative instance is found for a general empirical law, the law itself must be modified or rejected, since it states that people *do* behave in a certain way under certain circumstances. But if a negative instance is found for the sort of general statement which might be extracted out of a rational explanation, the latter would not necessarily be falsified. For that statement would express a judgement of the form: 'When in a situation of type $C_1 \ldots C_n$ the thing to do is x.' The 'implicit law' in such explanation is better called a *principle of action* than a generalization (or even a principle of inference).[1]

It is true that finding a large number of negative instances —finding that people often do not act in accordance with it— would create a presumption against the claim of a given principle to universal validity. But it would not *compel* its withdrawal; and if it was not withdrawn, the explanatory value of the principle for those actions which *were* in accordance with it would remain. It is true, too, that if a particular person often acted at variance with a principle which he was said to hold, the statement that he held that principle would come into question. But that statement would not *necessarily* be falsified; and if it were retained, we could still explain in the

[1] See Note D, p. 171.

rational way those of his actions which *were* in accordance with it. The connexion between a principle of action and the 'cases' falling under it is thus intentionally and peculiarly loose.

I do not deny, of course, that we often *can* predict successfully a person's response to a situation if we know, among other things, what his principles are (in so far as they are peculiar). In representing the action as the thing to have done, even in the extended sense required for rational explanation, we to some extent license the conclusion that it was the thing to have expected. Having said 'A did x because of y', where y is A's reason for doing x, we could also say that a bystander who knew the fact y, and also knew what A's purposes and principles were, should not be surprised at A's doing x. It is thus easy enough, under the guidance of a general theory of explanation which requires it, to slip into believing that the real force of the original explanation resides in alleviating such surprise; that its point is to show that this is the kind of thing we can expect to be done by such a person in such circumstances, and that the justification for the expectation must be found in experience of similar cases.

The widespread failure to distinguish between explanations which 'apply' empirical laws and those which 'apply' principles of action may owe something to the fact that the word 'because' is systematically ambiguous in this connexion. Taken in isolation, it is very seldom beyond all doubt whether a given explanatory statement of the form 'He did x because of y' is to be taken in the rational sense or not, i.e. whether the 'because' derives its explanatory force from an empirical law or a principle. The particular 'because' does not carry its language level on its face; this has to be determined by other means. It is thus often possible to interpret an explanation at the wrong level for a long time without committing any obvious logical errors. And this leaves plenty of room for manœuvring by philosophers who have a thesis to maintain which requires that only one level be recognized.

Whether an explanation of a piece of behaviour is to be

interpreted rationally or not will often depend on the context of utterance; we may have to ask how the explanation would be argued for, what else would be said if it were expanded, &c. Take the following example from Trevelyan's discussion of the problem of the early eighteenth-century smog in London:

> On days when the north-east wind carried the smoke-cloud, even Chelsea became dangerous to the asthmatic, as the mild philosopher Earl of Shaftesbury had reason to complain. There is no wonder that King William with his weak lungs had lived at Hampton Court when he could, and at Kensington when he must.[1]

The explanation offered can easily be reduced to a 'because' statement. But what exactly does the historian mean to imply: does he mean that any person *would* have done so, circumstances being what they were? Or does he mean that any *sensible* person would have done so? The explanation could surely be pushed either way, depending on how we cared to read it. And the explanation may be satisfactory (in the sense of 'adequate for its type') no matter which way it is read. Butterfield would no doubt elect to defend it in the second, or rational, way, while Gardiner, in the interests of his thesis, could choose the regularity way without obvious logical error. We cannot settle the issue between them until the writer gives us a more definite indication of what he intends. It is worth noticing, in this connexion, that many of the examples used by Gardiner to support the covering law model could be plausibly re-analysed in the rational way. The force of the explanation of Louis XIV's unpopularity in terms of his policies being detrimental to French interests is very likely to be found in the detailed description of the aspirations, beliefs, and problems of Louis's subjects. Given these men and their situation, Louis and his policies, their dislike of the king was an *appropriate* response.

Nor is the ambiguity confined to the word 'because'; it can be traced through a wide variety of terms used to describe and explain actions. It can be found, for instance, in the terms 'natural' and 'humanly possible', which Mr. W. H. Walsh

[1] *English Social History*, London, 1946, p. 337.

employs in *An Introduction to Philosophy of History*, when arguing that explanations of action in history are accomplished by means of basic non-technical generalizations.[1] "We are agreed", Walsh declares, "that to understand an historical situation we must bring some kind of general knowledge to bear on it, and the first question to ask here is clearly in what this general knowledge consists." Against the positivists he maintains that the most important generalizations used in an historian's explanations do not come from any of the sciences; they are fundamental judgements about human nature—"judgments about the characteristic responses human beings made to the various challenges set them in the course of their lives, whether by the natural conditions in which they live, or by their fellow beings". These constitute a 'science of human nature' distinguishable from scientific psychology; they provide the historian with a criterion of what is 'humanly possible', when he seeks to understand the past.

But the 'science of human nature' here described does not differ logically from scientific psychology; it is really just the common-sense psychology of the plain man. If left at that, Walsh's argument would make no other point against the positivists than Hempel's own admission that, because of the unfortunate backwardness of the science of psychology, historians must formulate many of the 'laws of human nature' required on the basis of their own experience. But the facts of historical writing which stimulate Walsh's sympathy with the idealists seem to me to require our drawing, not a distinction merely between different *sources* of empirical laws used, but between different *types* of explanation. For we sometimes want to explain actions not by representing them as instances of laws, but as the reasonable thing to have done; and when we do, if we appeal to 'general knowledge' at all, it is to principles of behaviour rather than empirical generalizations; to knowledge of what to do rather than of what is usually or always done.

Walsh does not put it this way, yet there are suggestions of

[1] Chap. III, sections 4, 5.

the point in some of his remarks. For instance, in pointing out that the basic general knowledge which historians bring to their work differs from one historian to another, he includes both knowledge of how men *do* and (he adds 'perhaps') *should* behave.[1] And again, in a footnote, he considers favourably Ryle's term 'knowledge how' (i.e. practical knowledge of some kind) as a characterization of what is to be included in the envisaged 'science of human nature'.[2] There is a hint of the same view in his acceptance of the suggestion that the 'science' in question is continuous with common sense—which, it may be remarked, is generally taken to cover our knowledge of what to do, as well as of what is generally done.[3] And the use of 'challenge-response' terminology in describing the nature of the fundamental judgements concerned points roughly in the same direction.[4]

Walsh's terms 'humanly possible' and 'human nature' are located at the centre of the difficulty; they straddle the distinction between explanation types, or between the levels of language at which we talk about actions. Consider the following explanatory remark of Ramsey Muir about a political decision of George III. "The king", he writes, ". . . naturally chose Shelburne rather than the hated Whigs."[5] In a way, this word does, as Walsh might say, represent the action as a characteristic response, in that anyone with George III's political memories would have tried to keep the Whigs out. But there is a very strong suggestion, too, that this response was *appropriate* in a rational sense; to say the choice naturally went to Shelburne is to imply that this was obviously the right thing for the king to do—from his point of view. Similarly, saying that an historian has a keen appreciation of what is 'humanly possible' *may* refer to the sort of law-governed phenomenon Walsh cites, e.g. "that men who undergo great physical privations are for the most part lacking in mental energy". But I think it may just as well refer to the fundamental

[1] p. 69. [2] p. 67.
[3] p. 66. [4] p. 65.
[5] *A Short History of the British Commonwealth*, vol. ii, p. 105.

principles on which any man may be expected to order his activities.

5. *The Standpoint of Historical Writing*

I have argued that rational explanation is a recognizably distinct type of explanation; that it employs a criterion of intelligibility which is different from that formulated by the covering law model, and that there are special reasons for objecting to the claim that such explanations require the truth of corresponding empirical laws. Let me now ask what we can say about the relation between such explanation and other kinds, and what, in general, is its role in historical writing.

It seems to me that there is a general presumption that a given action will be explicable on the rational model if we study it closely enough. The general belief that people act for sufficient reason does not arise out of definite pieces of evidence in particular cases; it is a *standing* presumption which requires contrary evidence in a particular case to defeat. Acknowledging the presumption does not imply that all actions must ultimately be done for sufficient reasons—even in the weak sense sketched in the foregoing sections; but it does register the conviction that it will generally be worth while making a sustained effort to 'save the appearances' rationally. If the first calculation we try to match with an action fails to fit it, then we normally consider ourselves obliged to look for evidence of additional, and perhaps queer, beliefs, &c., of the agent which, when explicitly recognized, permit the construction of a calculation which enjoins what was done. On the other hand, if we have satisfactorily achieved an equilibrium, we tend to regard this as a proper stopping place. The rational explanation of an action at a particular level carries a certain degree of plausibility on its face.

It is impossible to set theoretical limits to the guiding force of the presumption of rationality. It may often, for instance, lead us into attributing unconscious motives for action. Psychoanalysts seem to find it therapeutically useful to extend the scope of the presumption beyond the limits which would

be countenanced in ordinary historical writing. But although no firm boundary can be drawn here, it is nevertheless necessary to recognize the fact that there will be particular cases in which we find it impossible to rationalize what was done, so that if an explanation is to be given at all, it will have to be of another kind. To say *a priori* that all actions must have a rationale, no matter how hard to discover, is just a dogma—although we could make it analytically true by a suitable definition of 'action'. In the ordinary course of affairs, rational and non-rational explanations of actions are alternatives—and alternatives sought in a certain order. We give reasons if we can, and turn to empirical laws if we must.[1]

Not only is this done in the ordinary course of affairs; it is done, too, in ordinary historical writing. Historians, as well as plain men, tend to push their explanations as high up the 'scale of understanding' as possible. Proof for this assertion would have to rest upon a detailed examination of historical writing, which cannot be undertaken here. But the following quotation appears to me typical in what it reveals about the workaday approach of historians to the problem of explaining human actions. In *The English Revolution*, while describing the last years of the Interregnum, I. D. Jones remarks:

> It would be falsifying history to bring order out of the confusion of the year between the fall of Richard and the return of Charles II. *There is no logic or reason in it.* The resurrections and re-burials of the Rump: the meteoric energies and extinction of Lambert, now a Fifth Monarchist, now considered an eligible father-in-law to Charles Stuart: *the cryptic evolution of Monck* from the Cromwellian, Republican, Presbyterian to Royalist: the alliances of Fleetwood with Ludlow, Lambert, the Anabaptists and the Rump—all these events produce a tangled skein of desperation, irresolution and treachery *which needs a psychologist's rather than a historian's analysis.*[2]

The passage suggests that Jones has an ideal of explanation which he finds frustratingly inapplicable to the case of, for example, Monck's observed behaviour in 1658–9. He is so

[1] The relation between giving the reasons for, and giving the causes of, an action is a little more complicated. I discuss this in section 7.

[2] London, 1931, p. 106, my italics.

accustomed to using it in the course of his work that he appropriates it as *the* model of 'historical explanation', relegating the other kind (like Collingwood) to the attention of psychologists.[1] In so sharply repudiating any responsibility for giving a psychological explanation, Jones no doubt goes too far; for if a psychological theory were necessary and available to explain Monck's 'cryptic' behaviour, it would be the historian's business to use it, and it would be of interest to the reader to know it. But except in history deliberately written to a thesis, non-rational explanation only supplements, it does not replace, the rational sort.

In this respect history is logically continuous with literature rather than social science, if by the latter we mean something like a social 'physics'. This sort of claim has often been made, but usually for reasons which fail to reduce the cogency of the covering law theory as an account of the logical structure of all explanation. Trevelyan, for instance, seems to regard the use of narrative in the presentation of results as the feature which puts history among the humanities.[2] For to a narrative exposition, the canons of literary taste apply. The authors of the American Social Science Research Council's *Bulletin No. 64*, on the other hand, regard much historical writing as "in the tradition of the humanities" because, on their view, its conclusions lack empirical verification.[3] Both views leave the logical claims of the model intact. But my claim is rather that certain criteria of *what shall count as explanation* are applied throughout the humane studies which have, to say the least, a doubtful place in most programmes of social science. Even those who deplore this fact have often seen the point at issue. F. J. Teggart, a self-conscious reformer of history, in attacking the unregenerate kind, observes sourly: "The intelligibility which the historian thus introduces into the materials which he selects for his composition is of the same order as that pro-

[1] In *The Idea of History* (p. 29) Collingwood attacks history whose "chief purpose is to affirm laws, psychological laws". This, he says, is "not history at all, but natural science of a special kind".

[2] *History and the Reader*, London, 1945, pp. 10 ff.; and Trevelyan's plea for 'literary history' in *Clio, A Muse*, London, 1930, pp. 140–76. [3] pp. 130–1.

vided by the author of a historical novel or drama."[1] The comparison is, of course, in Teggart's eyes quite damning.

What is at stake here is the proper 'standpoint' or 'approach' to at any rate a large part of the subject-matter of history. Collingwood declares that history is not a *spectacle*.[2] What he means could perhaps be put in terms of a distinction between two standpoints from which human actions can be studied. When we subsume an action under a law, our approach is that of a spectator of the action; we look for a pattern or regularity in it. But when we give an explanation in terms of the purpose which guided the action, the problem which it was intended to resolve, the principle which it applied, &c., we adopt the standpoint from which the action was done: the standpoint of an agent. In adopting this standpoint, the investigator appreciates the agent's problem and appraises his response to it. The importance in history of explanations given from the agent's standpoint gives some point to well-known idealist dicta like 'All history is contemporary history', and 'All history is history of thought'. Such slogans are exaggerated and paradoxical, but they do register an awareness that the problems of historical agents have to be faced by the reader and the investigator if they are to understand what was done.

It should, perhaps, be added that the historian's preference for the rational model sometimes leads him into making highly elliptical explanatory statements when group rather than individual behaviour is being considered—statements which have sometimes scandalized literal-minded philosophers when they have come to analyse them. In highly condensed general histories, classes and nations and societies are often personified and written about in a quasi-rational way. Thus Germany's attack on Russia in 1941 may be explained by citing the threat of Russian encirclement—as if a 'calculation' of this sort were relevant to the actions of a super-agent called 'Germany'. The precise analysis of such statements would, no doubt, often present difficulties; but I think it is clear that reference to the

[1] *Theory and Processes of History*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1941, p. 78.
[2] Op. cit., pp. 164, 214.

more detailed studies on which such general histories rest would show that what the 'calculation' in question really explains is the actions of those individuals who were authorized to act 'for Germany'. In other cases the actions of groups are explained on the rational model by means of a kind of 'typical' calculation—e.g. when an historian asks why the Puritans, in particular, became exercised about taxation in seventeenth-century England, or why the Slavs were especially hostile to the Hapsburg monarchy in the early years of the present century. Such extensions of rational explanation would appear to raise no problem other than the practical one of determining whether, in a particular case, the group concerned is homogeneous enough for this kind of treatment.

A different, although related, problem which is sometimes raised by the extension of what I have called rational explanation beyond the sphere of particular actions of particular individuals, is whether the motives, purposes, circumstances, &c., of historical agents afford *sufficient* explanation of large-scale historical phenomena. There is, as Whitehead has put it, a "senseless side" to history;[1] and by this he means more than that natural phenomena, which cannot, of course, be explained rationally, have to be taken into account by historians. For the 'senseless' also appears in larger-scale social results of individual actions which are not themselves explicable on the rational model because they are not what any individual—even one acting for a group—intended or even wanted to happen; and they may often, indeed, be quite the reverse. According to Mrs. K. Cornforth, it is precisely this sort of thing (e.g. "the introduction of steam in modern times, and the development of the cinema industry") which can be explained by general 'scientific' theories of the historical process; and she regards such explanations as the more profound and important ones.[2] M. R. Cohen, too, warns us against

[1] *Adventures of Ideas*, Cambridge, 1933, p. 8.
[2] 'Explanation in History', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supp. Vol.*, 1935, p. 137.

exaggerating the extent to which the notion of 'purpose' can be appealed to in explaining social phenomena.[1] The voyage of Columbus was a cause of the spread of European civilization to America, but the result is not explained by the voyage, nor did Columbus intend it.

What Cornforth and Cohen say has a certain point, but it can be misleading. For to say that the sort of phenomena they have in mind cannot be explained, or explained adequately, in purposive terms may mean one or another of two things. If it means merely that they cannot be explained in terms of the purposes of some individual who stage-managed the whole thing, then of course no objection need be raised at all. But if they mean that a perfectly adequate explanation of the gross event cannot be given in terms of the rationale of the activities of the various individuals involved—and this is strongly suggested—then it is surely necessary to disagree. An historian's explanation of the spread of European civilization to America will normally be what I called in Chapter II 'piecemeal'; and it will involve a detailed examination, mainly in rational terms, of the activities and motives of countless individuals and groups; the French Jesuits and the English Puritans as well as Columbus; Colbert and Raleigh as well as Philip II; fur traders, explorers, gold-seekers, land-hungry peasants, and a host of others. As for the question whether explanation can or cannot, should or should not, be given in terms of 'theories of the historical process' where these are available, all that needs to be said is that this would be uncharacteristic of ordinary historical writing. And I can see no reason to brand the more characteristic sort of thing less 'profound'.

6. *The Model of the Dispositional Statement*

There remains the question of how my account of typical explanations of action in history squares with the alternative analysis offered by Gardiner in *The Nature of Historical Explanation*. Gardiner's account of the way we are "to interpret

[1] 'The Social Sciences and the Natural Sciences', *The Social Sciences and their Interrelations*, eds. W. F. Ogburn and A. Goldenweiser, Boston, 1927, pp. 445–6.

explanations in terms of motives, desires, intentions, and so forth" is summarized in the following passage, with reference to the example: 'John hit you with a hammer because he is bad-tempered.' Of this statement, he writes:

> It would be absurd to deny that this is an explanation: but it would be equally ludicrous to imagine that it could in some manner be 'reduced' to an explanation asserting a causal relation between two events or processes, one of which is labelled 'John's bad temper'. 'John is bad-tempered' is a sentence which, amongst other things, is predictive of how John is likely to behave in various (only vaguely indicated) types of situations. The function of the 'because' in the statement alluded to is to set a statement referring to a specific action within the context of a general statement about John's behaviour which can be 'unpacked' into an indefinite range of statements concerning his reactions to various kinds of circumstances. It represents, if you like, an *instance* of how he can in general be expected to behave under certain conditions. It sets John's action within a pattern, the pattern of his normal behaviour.
>
> It is in terms of this usage of 'explanation', rather than in terms of the cause-effect usage, that historians' (and ordinary persons') accounts of human actions of the kind we are considering are to be understood. This is not to say that it would be correct to bundle together into an amorphous heap historical explanations referring to desires, intentions, purposes, plans, and programmes, as if there were not important differences between them. To say that an individual's actions were planned or conformed to a programme or policy may be very different from saying that they were intended; and again, to say that they were intended can be different from saying that they were motivated by such-and-such a desire. And these cases again are different from those in which we say that his actions were 'reasoned' or 'considered'. But in all these instances it is with explanation in the sense of fitting a particular action within a certain pattern that we are concerned. The patterns are familiar to us both from experience of our own behaviour and from experience of the ways other people behave; and it is in virtue of this that we are able to make the inferences and provide the explanations in question.[1]

Gardiner here contends that statements attributing motives, purposes, intentions, &c., have a peculiar and complex logical form. He admits that such statements cannot be forced into the Procrustean Bed of the covering law model, and in admitting this, he parts company with both Popper and Hempel.

[1] pp. 124–5.

In a passage quoted in Chapter I, Popper remarks: ". . . 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". And Hempel, too, goes out of his way to deny that explanations in terms of the motives of individuals raise any difficulties for the covering law analysis. Such explanations, he says, are not "essentially different from the causal explanations of physics and chemistry". For Hempel, motives are antecedent conditions which must be linked to resulting actions by covering laws before they have explanatory force.[1] Presumably he would deal in a similar way with all those explanations which attribute desires, emotions, purposes, plans, &c., to historical agents.

Gardiner's refusal to follow Popper and Hempel here is based on a general analysis of 'mental conduct concepts' similar to the one offered by Ryle in *The Concept of Mind*.[2] According to Ryle, laws connect events or govern processes—but motives are neither events nor processes. The notion that a motive could be a special kind of antecedent condition or cause of actions, i.e. a mental kind, he repudiates as a 'logical howler'; for if true, it would make a large range of causal statements about actions empirically unverifiable—not just in practice, but in principle. It is not just that, in the case of other people, we cannot observe the ghostly events or processes—the various motives—which would have to be mentioned in the protases of the law statements supposed to be required for causal explanation. We cannot properly be said to observe such mental causes even in ourselves—a contention which undercuts any protest that we argue by analogy from our own experience to the existence of mental causes correlated with other people's overt behaviour. Ryle maintains that our ordinary use of motive language lends support to his thesis here. To put it formally: if motive words name events

[1] Such laws, linking motive with action motivated, should not be confused with laws linking circumstances with actions responding to them.

[2] London, 1949, especially chap. iv.

or processes, then event-predicates and process-predicates should be applicable. But, as Ryle's book is designed to show in impressive detail, the attempt to apply them generates nonsense.

If, for these reasons, explanation in terms of motives cannot require the currency of a general law, what is its logical force? Ryle answers this question with a general account of the logic of dispositional characteristics. He argues that to attribute a motive to an agent is to relate the motivated action to certain other things the agent did, or would have done, in these and other circumstances. To use Gardiner's phrase, the "function of the 'because' " in a motive explanation is to indicate the general pattern of behaviour of which the particular action is a part. The logical model for explanation of this kind is given at its simplest in Ryle's celebrated contrast between two kinds of thing we can say about the breaking of a pane of glass. If we say 'The glass broke when the stone hit it because whenever stones hit glass it breaks', we give (subject to the qualifications urged in preceding chapters) a law-covered explanation. But if we say 'The glass broke when the stone hit it because it is brittle', we explain what happened in terms of a dispositional property of glass. The dispositional characteristic 'being brittle' is neither an additional antecedent happening nor a law. It has, however, an explanatory value of its own because, like a law, there is generality in it.

A statement attributing a dispositional characteristic like 'brittle' might be called 'lawlike' because, like a law, it is at least partly hypothetical in what it implies; it can be satisfied by a wide range of behaviour, of which shattering on the impact of a stone is only one kind. The relation which covering law theorists claim to find between prediction and explanation is therefore, to some extent, preserved. If we know that glass is brittle, we know what sort of thing to expect when we hear that a brick has been thrown at a window pane. The precision of prediction decreases, of course, with the complexity of the behaviour pattern indicated by the dispositional term. In the case of glass, and in the case of human reflexes and

habits—Ryle's 'single-track' or determinate dispositions—actualizations follow a narrowly restricted pattern. But in the case of motives—which are 'many-tracked' or determinable—they do not. Thus to say that Disraeli attacked Peel in 1846 because he was ambitious is to imply only that the attack was one of a number of things, systematically related, which the use of the word 'ambition' licenses us to expect. It is not to imply that from the conditions of 1846 it could have been *deduced* (with the aid of the dispositional statement) that he would make such an attack.

Covering law theorists may be tempted to argue that the connexion between dispositional and law-covered explanations is really much closer than I have made it appear; for just as, in the case of the breaking glass, we may assume that the dispositional property holds by virtue of certain physical laws concerning the behaviour of glass and bricks, so the dispositional properties attributed to human agents may appear to be applicable because of there being regularities in human behaviour which are formulable in terms of laws (however 'loose'). But if this is taken to mean that a dispositional explanation of a particular human action depends in any way on the truth of such laws, it involves a misunderstanding of the distinction which has been drawn between explanation types. For 'ambition' is not a *general* characteristic of men (or even, perhaps, of politicians) in the way 'being brittle' is of glass. To say 'Disraeli attacked Peel because he was ambitious' draws attention to the general pattern of action into which his particular action fits, but it implies nothing about the kind of men from whom this kind of action can be expected. It merely implies that action of this general pattern can be expected from Disraeli; it subsumes his action under a regularity said to hold for a particular person, rather than a regularity said to hold for all persons of a certain type.[1] Dispositional explanation thus falls short of law-covered explanation in its *particularity* (a point which Gardiner's brief discussion may not have made clear). It is accidental, not essential, to the explana-

[1] See Note E, p. 171.

tion, that in the case of the glass we know that objects of this *kind* will have the dispositional property mentioned. The modification of the covering law theory represented by the recognition of dispositional explanation is therefore quite a major one.

Like explanations in terms of a covering generalization, dispositional explanations often appear so trivial as to invite the judgement: 'Really no explanation at all.' In general, the more 'single-track' the disposition referred to, the more trivial will the explanation appear. This helps to explain the fact that the logical respectability of dispositional explanation has not always been admitted even in quarters where 'regularity' is taken as the watchword. Crawford, for instance, attacks his fellow historian, Lord Elton, in withering terms for declaring, in an account of the failure of local government in the early years of the French Revolution: "Centralization is in the blood of Frenchmen; and Frenchmen must be administered, even if they are not governed." This Crawford castigates as a mere "seeming explanation".[1] It can be reduced, he says, to the statement: "Frenchmen preferred centralized administration because they had the habit of preferring centralized administration." And this (although formally sound on the dispositional model) he finds quite unenlightening. Crawford's 'reduction' of this rather flowery example of dispositional explanation to a 'habit' statement may perhaps go too far. But any answer to the question 'Why?' which *could* be reduced to 'It's habitual with him', would at least leave room for argument as to whether it offered a very trivial explanation, or avoided the demand for explanation altogether.

The majority of dispositional statements about people, however, are not trivial in this way, and it is not hard to discover historical examples whose logical force is much more plausibly elicited by Ryle's model of the breaking glass than by the original covering law theory. S. R. Gardiner, for instance, explains the fatal policy of Charles I dispositionally when he observes: "What he was doing he did from a *love of order*,

[1] Op. cit., p. 16.

combined with sheer *ignorance* of mankind." And the same sort of explanation is often also given of the behaviour of groups, for example, in accounting for the peculiarities of Irish Americans by referring to their Anglophobia.

The question which remains to be answered, however, is whether *all* explanations of human action in terms of motives, intentions, purposes, &c., can be accounted for in terms of the dispositional model: in particular, whether dispositional analysis brings out the real point of what, in previous sections, I called 'rational explanation'. And it seems to me clear enough that it does not. A pure dispositional explanation tells us that the person or thing under investigation tended to do things of (perhaps roughly) the sort done, under certain (unspecified) circumstances. It shows that what was done was the sort of thing we might have expected—it was the sort of thing that *would be* done by this person or thing. But in most historical contexts, such an explanation would tell us scarcely anything we really wanted to know when we asked: 'Why did he do it?' For in giving the dispositional answer, the *point* of what was done tends to drop out of sight. To attempt to analyse explanations of the form, '*A* did *x* in order to achieve *y*', as covertly dispositional simply ignores the question which we may reasonably assume the investigator to have had in mind when he represented this *as* an explanation.

It is not without significance in this connexion to remark that dispositional explanation is very frequently given in history where it is necessary to head off the reader's incipient demand to know 'Why?' in the rational sense. The following example of a genuine dispositional explanation of a rather complex sort illustrates the point. I. D. Jones, in accounting for Cromwell's political decisions of the late 1640's, declares:

> His speeches and letters show his difficulty in reaching decisions and his reluctance to assume responsibility; he had not the mind that could plan ahead, but the genius that acted on impulse. He originated none of the many schemes of his party; he took fire from the ideas of others, such as Ireton, Harrison and Lambert. He waited, often in agonies of indecision, for guidance from "Providences"—the hand of God revealed in events; he read the omens like a Roman Consul. This, alone and adequately, explains his sudden adoption of the extremists in May 1647 and December 1648, and his final decision on Charles' death. . . .[1]

Here Jones explains the impulsive, inadequately reasoned decisions of 1647–8 by locating them in a general pattern of Cromwell's behaviour during those years. When we see them in this context of dispositions we are no longer surprised. Similarly, in the case of the explanation of the policy of Charles I, quoted above, the historian—perhaps because of the great stupidity of the king's behaviour—is content to show that it was characteristic.

But although dispositional characterization may alleviate surprise, it does not do it by revealing the point or rationale of what was done. For 'disposition' is a spectator's word; it belongs to the language of observing and predicting, rather than of deliberating and deciding. If the *agent* were to explain his action by pointing out which of his dispositional characteristics he had actualized, his explanation would seem oddly irrelevant. Nor should we think of saying: 'So that's the disposition Smith was actualizing! Now I see what he was up to!' It is true, of course, that many of the component factual statements of a rational explanation—e.g. statements of what the agent's beliefs and attitudes were—may be accepted on the basis of arguments of the form: 'He tends to do so-and-so, so he must believe so-and-so.' And it may even be alleged that belief is, itself, a dispositional characteristic. But to allow this would not be to admit that the explanation given by means of such factual statements is itself dispositional in form.

In his discussion of dispositional analysis, Ryle warns us that we must avoid "equating understanding with psychological diagnosis, i.e. with causal inferences from overt behaviour to mental processes in accordance with laws yet to be discovered by the psychologists . . .".[2] With this I have no quarrel, but I think the statement just as true if 'psychological diagnosis' is taken more broadly than Ryle's proviso allows. For we must also avoid equating understanding with merely

[1] *The English Revolution*, p. 85.

[2] Op. cit., p. 58.

recognizing that actions fall under certain behaviour patterns, or that they are likely to be preceded and followed by actions of a related kind.

In saying this I am not complaining, as some critics have, that dispositional analysis, when applied to 'mental conduct concepts', is a kind of *behaviourism*. For the distinction between dispositions and occurrences cuts across that between what is covert and what is overt, so that some exercises of most human dispositional characteristics will be overt, while others will be covert. My complaint is rather that, as an account of what have often been called 'teleological explanations', dispositional analysis is a kind of *spectatorism*. It misconstrues the logic of typical explanations of human actions because it manœuvres the investigator into considering them from the wrong standpoint. There is a sense of 'explain' in which an action is only explained when it is seen in a context of rational deliberation; when it is seen from the point of view of an agent. Ryle appears to me to be a much safer guide to the analysis of such explanations when, at several points in *The Concept of Mind*, he represents understanding another person's action as a matter of 'following the workings' of his mind.[1] For into this notion could be read most of what I have tried to say about rational explanation.

7. *Dispositions, Reasons, and Causes*

There is one other question arising out of Gardiner's dispositional theory which requires comment if we are not to be misled about the nature of explanation of action in history. Gardiner, like Ryle, draws a sharp distinction between dispositional and causal explanation; he says, for instance, that the statement, 'John hit you with a hammer because he is bad-tempered' cannot be "reduced to an explanation asserting a causal relation between two events or processes, one of which is labelled 'John's bad temper' ". But although this is true, Gardiner appears to me to reach his conclusion for the wrong reason, i.e. that motives like 'bad temper' since they are to be

[1] p. 61.

analysed as dispositions to behave in certain ways, rather than as occurrences, cannot be causes. At one point, for instance, he says that motive explanations are "not causal at all".[1] In this he appears to follow Ryle, who, in *The Concept of Mind*, declared: "Motives are not happenings, and are therefore not of the right type to be causes."[2]

That this conclusion cannot be correct is strongly suggested by the very common citation of dispositional characteristics as causes by historians. Sir David Keir, having pointed out that, following English reverses in the Dutch War of 1665–7, there was "a new encroachment on the Prerogative" by the Commons, observes: "Charles' resentment at this intrusion was undoubtedly one of the many causes which led him to abandon Clarendon to impeachment in 1667."[3] And some of the dispositional examples noted in the preceding section could easily be recast into causal form—for instance, 'The cause of the fatal policy of Charles I was his love of order and ignorance of mankind', or 'It was Disraeli's ambition which caused his attack on Peel in 1646'. What modifications should be made in the Ryle–Gardiner theory in the light of such cases?

I do not think that the admission that 'bad temper' or 'ambition' or 'ignorance' can be a cause need give any comfort to those who (as Ryle might put it) wish to reinstate the ghost in the machine. For there is no need to assume that because motives, intentions, habits, beliefs, and the rest can be causes, they are therefore to be regarded as mental events or processes after all. The error is to be located rather in thinking that only events or processes can be causes, whereas there would seem to be virtually no restriction whatever upon the *type* of thing that can qualify as a cause, provided it passes, in a particular context, what, in Chapter IV, I called the pragmatic and inductive tests. If John would not have hit me had he been good tempered (i.e. the presumption is that the occasion

[1] Op. cit., p. 134. Gardiner does deny that explanations are always in terms of events; but this is only to leave room for explanations in terms of (non-causal) dispositions, rather than for causes which are not events (see p. 1).

[2] p. 113.

[3] *Constitutional History of Modern Britain* (4th edn.), 1950, p. 249.

scarcely justified the blow), then his bad temper may be regarded as a necessary condition; and since we may feel that it is high time he took his temper in hand, we may select this necessary condition as the pragmatically important one, and thus call it the cause. As Professor Urmson has pointed out, "what is referred to in one context as a motive may be referred to in another as a cause".[1] It is the context of inquiry which determines whether a dispositional characteristic will be a causal candidate or not.

The apparent logical cleavage between causal and dispositional explanation has sometimes been closed in another way. Mr. P. Alexander, for instance, reminds us that for a disposition to be actualized there must be an occasion—which he calls the cause.[2] A piece of glass shatters when a stone hits it *both* because it has the dispositional property of being brittle and because someone provides a cause by throwing a brick at it. But although I agree that to cite a dispositional property might properly be regarded as an incomplete explanation of what happened if the occasion is unknown, to regard the occasion, rather than the dispositional property, as 'the cause' is to make the mistake already mentioned. It is to assume that causal conditions must be events or processes (while shrinking from admitting that they may be 'mental' ones). Alexander thinks that to call a motive a cause "would be absurd". But this supposed absurdity is actually a commonplace. A dispositional characteristic is a type of 'standing condition'; and standing conditions, as well as precipitating ones, can be causes.

The distinction between causal and dispositional explanation, although it is important to draw it, should therefore not be drawn in such a way that dispositions *as such* are denied causal status. A somewhat similar qualification will be found necessary if we attempt to draw a logical line between causal and rational explanation, as many philosophers who recognize

[1] 'Motives and Causes', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supp. Vol.*, 1952, p. 193.
[2] 'Cause and Cure in Psychotherapy', ibid., 1955, p. 34.

a difference between answers in terms of reasons and causes do. For (to put it a little crudely) reasons, too, can be causes.

Consider, for instance, Halévy's explanation of a strike at Newcastle in May 1816: it was, he writes "caused by insufficient wages and the high price of bread".[1] It is surely not misreading what is asserted to say that the conditions here described as the cause are precisely those which were 'taken into account' by the strikers in reaching the decision to stop work. The rational basis of the asserted causal connexion is even more explicitly brought out in the following explanation by D. Thomson of the cleavage between the landed and industrial groups in England in the nineteenth century. He writes:

> The use to which the landed interests put their predominance in Parliament to protect themselves in this way at the expense of the industrial populations of the towns and the manufacturing interests caused the first big open split between landed and manufacturing interests. All alike wanted steady and level prices: but the industrial interests, employers and workers alike, wanted this to be at a low level, so as to make wages go further, keep wage-bills low and therefore the cost of manufactured goods low, and enable them to reap maximum benefits in world markets. The cotton-merchants likewise wanted the plentiful import of cheap corn to enable the corn-exporting countries to pay for the manufactured cotton goods that England exported. The landowners and farmers wanted corn-prices stabilized at a high level. Thus two distinct groups of economic interests grew up, bitterly hostile to one another: and this led to the long agitation for the repeal of the Corn Laws, the Free Trade movement as a whole, and the demand for the lessening of the power enjoyed by the agricultural and landed interests in Parliament.[2]

In *Other Minds*, Professor John Wisdom observes, truly, that some causes are very nearly reasons.[3] But this does not quite say what such examples require us to say about the relation between causal and rational explanation; for even this remark preserves the dichotomy. What is required is a qualified restatement of Collingwood's doctrine that in history

[1] Op. cit., vol. ii, p. 10.
[2] *England in the Nineteenth Century*, Harmondsworth, 1950, p. 37.
[3] Oxford, 1952, p. 2.

the term 'cause' is often (he, as we saw in Chapter IV, said 'always') used in Sense I: the sense in which to cause someone to do something is to provide him with a motive for doing it (where 'motive' means 'reason'). As Collingwood himself observed, to be caused to act in this sense does not imply that the agent did not make up his mind to do what he did on the basis of certain rational considerations.[1] It is true that in many cases, we should not say that the agent acted freely; for often providing someone with reasons for doing something, for example, holding a pistol to his head, is precisely what we mean by compelling him to do what he does. But even in such a case, the causal connexion between the pointed pistol and the agent's subsequent behaviour is to be understood in rational terms.

The important point for our account of explanation in history is that the necessity of a causal connexion, when it is actions we are talking about, is very often *rational* necessity. In Chapter IV, in discussing the logic of 'cause', I said that although there are various ways of arguing for a causal assertion, the cause had to be a necessary condition of its effect. But there is more than one kind of necessity; and in history the relevant kind will often be that found in action done for a good reason (from the agent's point of view). In the situation sketched by Halévy, for instance, if we are to establish the causal connexion between the strike and the "insufficient wages and the high price of bread", we shall have to fill out the circumstances, beliefs, &c., of the strikers to the point where we can say that without the additional conditions cited, there would have been insufficient reason for going out.

Is there no important difference, then, between saying of the action of a rational agent, '*A*'s reason for doing *x* was *y*', and saying 'The cause of *A*'s doing *x* was *y*'? The difference, I think, is one of approach, or point of view, or kind of inquiry. To say the first sort of thing is—as has been suggested at length in the present chapter—to adopt the point of view of an agent. To say the second is to adopt the point of view of a

[1] *An Essay on Metaphysics*, p. 290.

manipulator—although of one well aware that he is dealing with agents who act on rational considerations. Butterfield, in the passage quoted in section 1, contrasts empathetic understanding with "a causal or stand-offish attitude"; and this distinction remains even when it is admitted that the cause of an action may be that which provides the agent with a reason for doing what was done. And it is a fact of ordinary historical writing that historians do sometimes take up this 'stand-offish' attitude in explaining even the rational behaviour of their characters.