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978-0-521-29908-4 - Action and Interpretation: Studies in the Philosophy of the Social Sciences

Edited by Christopher Hookway and Philip Pettit

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Action and Interpretation

Studies in
the Philosophy of the Social Sciences

Edited by

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge

London New York New Rochelle

Melbourne Sydney

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Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore,
São Paulo, Delhi, Dubai, Tokyo, Mexico City

Cambridge University Press

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521299084

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First published 1978

First paperback edition 1980

Re-issued 2010

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-0-521-21740-8 Hardback

ISBN 978-0-521-29908-4 Paperback

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Introduction

Problems in the philosophy of social science cluster around three issues. First, there is the question of whether forms of explanation to be found in social science conform to the pattern exhibited in the natural sciences. Many have denied that they do, arguing that at least the explanation of action by reference to mental states is distinct from ordinary explanation. A second issue has to do with the principles that we use in the selection of social-science theories. The question here is whether values intrude in such a way that theory choice has moral and political significance. And finally, the issue arises of whether there are forms of explanation in social science which do not depend on our explanations of people's actions. Individualists would say that there are not, while holists would argue that some social phenomena are to be explained by laws which do not obtain simply as the result of independently explicable human actions.

The problems discussed in this volume concern the first and second issues. Mostly they are raised against the background assumption that the way to explain people's sayings and doings, whether or not it is distinctive, is by reference to mental states. Such explanation involves the interpretative procedure of reading off states like beliefs and desires from the actions which they are invoked to explain. Hence the title which we have given to the volume: *Action and Interpretation*.

Although there are many varieties of interpretative explanation of behaviour, they all invoke states such as beliefs and desires. These states are 'intentional', in the sense that we identify them by reference to their objects but allow those objects to be taken only under certain descriptions. Suppose that we represent them so that their objects are propositions: we say that John believes or desires *that such-and-such*. Their intentionality means that we have no other way of picking them out than by reference to the propositional object and that if we try to redescribe that object, replacing 'such-and-such' by an equivalent sentence, we run the risk not only of picking out a different belief or desire, but of picking out a belief or desire which the agent does not

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actually have. To put the point by way of example: John may believe that the person who stole his wallet is anti-social, or he may desire that that person be punished, without believing or desiring these things of James, even though James is the thief in question.

The intentionality of beliefs and desires raises a problem. We cannot be sure of what a man believes or desires simply by seeing what 'object' is presented to his attention, for we do not know that we are describing the object appropriately. We cannot be certain of being helped by having him tell us what he believes or desires, for we rely on our assumptions about precisely such mental states of his when we translate what he says into our idiolect. And while an examination of his non-verbal behaviour will supplement those other sources of information, narrowing down the range of beliefs and desires which we can plausibly attribute to him, we cannot be sanguine that a considerable discretion in interpretation will not remain.

Perhaps this is a special case of a more general phenomenon: that attending to experience will not reduce the number of explanatory theories to one and that we must make use of principles of theory choice, and apply prior standards of plausibility and coherence, in selecting a theory from among those which are compatible with the same evidence. Quine describes this phenomenon as the underdetermination of theory by experience and argues that in good scientific practice theories are preferred to rivals which are equally compatible with the evidence on grounds such as that they are more simple and less novel.

Mary Hesse's paper in this volume is concerned with the consequences of the underdetermination of theory by data. She suggests that in the natural sciences theory choice is guided primarily by the pragmatic criterion of predictive success, but she does not think that the principle can always be applied in the social sciences. Thus she wonders whether we may not have to resort to more controversial principles in selecting our social theories. These principles would reflect freely adopted value goals and would make the choice of a social theory like the choice of a political stance.

Principles of theory choice are sometimes defended on the grounds that the theories which they select are more likely to be true: by using such principles, it is held, we are helped to grasp the unobservable mechanisms which explain phenomena. The suggestion that the social sciences are value-laden might be grounded in the view that principles used in the area cannot be justified in that kind of way. The idea would be that the principles serve only to express considerations of a practical nature. One way of motivating that idea is provided in Quine's argu-

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ment for the indeterminacy of translation, which suggests that while theory choice in the natural sciences engages the issue of truth, it does not do so when we are dealing with the intentional. The argument is that with underdetermined theories as to someone's beliefs and desires, there is no language-independent realm of meanings in regard to which the theories differ. The realm of speech and behaviour on which the theories agree, being equally compatible with such data, is all that there is, and so the choice between the theories is one of practical significance only.

Christopher Hookway's paper is an attempt to construct a trouble-free version of Quine's argument and to draw out some of the implications of the argument for our understanding of interpretation, especially in social anthropology. He claims that a non-realist account of intentionality should be preferred because it provides the best explanation of how we normally understand each other so well and so easily, and because it can explain how public meanings inform our private intentional states.

Even if we have great leeway in making up our minds about how to interpret the behaviour of other people and other groups, it is arguable that certain general constraints must always be respected in any theory we espouse. Philip Pettit thinks that those constraints constitute an overall theory of human behaviour which he calls 'rational man theory'. His paper discusses the nature of that theory, its function, and the application that may be made of it in social science, particularly social psychology.

In his paper Alan Ryan concerns himself explicitly with social psychology, distinguishing between three sorts of rational explanation of action, in terms of maximising returns, meeting obligations and staging performances. He raises some of the familiar difficulties of both returns-maximising and obligation-meeting explanations and asks whether the dramaturgical option, particularly as exemplified in Erving Goffman's work, is really distinctive. The paper presents two readings of dramaturgical explanation: one depicts men as interested in cutting aesthetic figures, the other as concerned with negotiating definitions of their situations.

The contribution by John Skorupski shifts the emphasis from social psychology to social anthropology. He examines the way in which we understand the systems of thought and activity of another culture and tries to show how such interpretation is affected by our philosophical theory of meaning: that is, by our view of how language relates to the world. In the three main sections of his paper he investigates different conceptions of ritual, the plausibility of

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relativism, and the extent to which our interpretations can reveal incoherence in an alien belief system.

Nick Jardine is concerned with interpretation in the history of science, his aim being to defend the realist view according to which past investigators dealt, albeit not so successfully, with the same subject matter as their present-day counterparts. He criticises a principle of interpretation defended by Hilary Putnam – the principle of benefit of the doubt – and offers an alternative set of principles which he defends by appeal to a consensus theory of reference.

The question of realism is in the background of many of the papers in the volume, the realist assumption being generally made that we can conceive of the truth or falsity of a sentence even when we have no means of finally deciding the sentence's truth-value. In his paper John McDowell defends a moderate version of realism against the anti-realist arguments which Michael Dummett has put forward. Dummett's claim is that our grasp of a thought is constituted by our knowledge of how to determine whether it is true or false, rather than by a grasp of a possibly undetectable truth condition. Thus he questions the intelligibility of the suggestion that there might have been events in the distant past which, having left no trace, are now inaccessible. McDowell challenges such anti-realism, in respect of its implications both for our knowledge of the past and for our knowledge of other minds.

The final paper is by John Dunn, who seeks as a practising social scientist to confront the issues raised in the volume. He defends an interpretative or hermeneutic conception of the understanding of human behaviour but realises that the problems faced by a mentalist view of intentional states cast doubt on the possibility of a realist hermeneutic science. He argues that the difficulties are not such as to dissuade us from adopting a hermeneutic approach, and he suggests that the approach should not lead to any form of relativism.

This volume of essays is a by-product of some small meetings of philosophers and social scientists which were organised by the Thyssen Philosophy Group and financed through the generosity of the Fritz Thyssen Stiftung. The essays are reworked versions of some of the papers presented at those meetings. On behalf of the Thyssen Philosophy Group we would like to express our gratitude to the Fritz Thyssen Stiftung for its financial assistance and to the Director of the Stiftung, Dr Gerd Brand, for his advice and encouragement.

January 1977

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