

How to Explain *Meaningful* Actions

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Abstract

There is a long tradition in philosophy and the social sciences that emphasizes the meaningfulness of human action. This tradition doubts or even negates the possibility of causal explanations of human behaviour precisely on the basis that human actions have meaning. This paper provides an argument in favour of methodological naturalism in the social sciences. It grants the main argument of the Interpretivists, i.e. that human actions are meaningful, but it shows how a transformation of a “nexus of meaning” into a “causal nexus” can take place, based on the “successful transformation argument”. It discusses four approaches that describe the “nexus of meaning” connected with a human action based on the motives, the intentions, the reasons and the rationality of the action respectively. From the standpoint of each approach a causal nexus can arise – namely, if the respective motives, intentions, reasons, or the human rationality that is manifest in the different nexuses of meaning possess certain invariances. These approaches can thus be formulated as theories, which explain human action every time that the nexuses of meaning – described with the diverse conceptual apparatuses – can be transformed into causal nexuses. It is shown, thus, that explanations based on motives, intentions, reasons, or rationality are possible, as are explanations of human action based on, at least in principle, an unlimited number of other theories.

Längere deutsche Zusammenfassung

Es gibt eine lange Tradition in der Philosophie und in den Sozialwissenschaften, die betont, dass menschliche Handlungen Sinn haben. Diese Tradition bezweifelt die Möglichkeit einer kausalen Erklärung von menschlichen Handlungen genau wegen der Tatsache, dass sie Sinn haben. Dieser Aufsatz präsentiert ein neues Argument zugunsten des methodologischen Naturalismus in den Sozialwissenschaften. Er gesteht das Hauptargument der Interpretivisten, d.h. dass menschliche Handlungen Sinn haben, aber er zeigt, dass eine Transformation von Sinnzusammenhängen in Wirkungszusammenhänge durchaus möglich ist, und zwar aufgrund des „Arguments der erfolgreichen Transformation“. Es werden vier einflussreiche Ansätze diskutiert, welche den Sinn einer Handlung mit Hilfe der Angabe des Motivs, der Intention, der Gründe oder der Rationalität der Handlung zu erfassen versuchen. Unabhängig davon, aufgrund welchen Ansatzes und mittels welchen Beschreibungssystems man einen Sinnzusammenhang erfasst, besteht im Prinzip die Möglichkeit, dass die grundlegenden Elemente dieses Sinnzusammenhanges auch in Verbindung mit anderen Handlungen derselben oder anderer Personen vorkommen können. Mit „grundlegenden Elementen“ meine ich dabei sowohl sämtliche relevanten mentalen Zustände des Handelnden als auch sämtliche relevanten Mechanismen, die bei der Ausführung einer Handlung am Werke sind. Jedes Mal, wenn es gelingt, die grundlegenden Elemente eines Sinnzusammenhanges auch bei der Beschreibung anderer Sinnzusammenhänge zu identifizieren, ist es möglich, Sinnzusammenhänge als Wirkungszusammenhänge zu betrachten. Der Schlüssel zur Transformation von Sinnzusammenhängen in Wirkungszusammenhänge liegt also im Aufzeigen einer Invarianz im Vorkommen der grundlegenden Elemente in verschiedenen Sinnzusammenhängen. Bei denjenigen Fällen, wo eine solche Transformation möglich ist, können Sinnzusammenhänge nomologisch erfasst werden und daher kann ihr wiederkehrendes Auftreten erklärt werden. Dementsprechend ist eine Erklärung aus Motiven, Intentionen, Gründen oder Rationalität möglich, sowie natürlich auch eine Erklärung menschlichen Handelns mit Hilfe einer prinzipiell unendlichen Anzahl anderer Theorien.

1. Introduction

One of the oldest and most enduring debates in the philosophy of the social sciences is among Naturalists and Interpretivists. Both camps agree that the starting point of the inquiry in the social sciences is human action; the point of disagreement concerns the issue of how human action should be approached and how it is to be studied by the social scientific disciplines (M. Salmon, 2003). Naturalists since Mill have argued that human actions have to be viewed as natural phenomena in a continuum with other phenomena in nature and that they should thus be studied accordingly, i.e. as natural phenomena. A specific method for studying human actions as they occur in the social world is not thought to be necessary and the social sciences are not regarded to have any special status within the spectrum of scientific disciplines. Interpretivists since Dilthey and Collingwood on the other hand have argued that human actions cannot be viewed as natural phenomena since they are categorically distinct from them in being bestowed with meaning. *Verstehen* or understanding is thought to be the appropriate method for studying human actions as they occur in the social world and the social sciences are assigned a special status in the spectrum of the scientific disciplines.

This debate has a number of different facets, the most important being the ontological and the methodological ones. Naturalists usually argue that human actions *are* natural phenomena and they also argue that they can be apprehended by the *method* of the natural sciences. Interpretivists usually argue that human actions *are not* natural phenomena proper and they should be, thus, apprehended by a specific *method*. In this paper I will not deal with the arguments on ontology, but I will only discuss the methodological aspect of the debate. I will present an argument in favour of a minimalistic methodological naturalism that I call the “successful transformation argument”. This argument has four steps and aims to establish the claim that even if human actions are meaningful, they can still be subject to generalizations and thus be explained. Let me turn to the four steps of the argument.

2. The “successful transformation argument”

Step one: Human actions have meaning

Unstructured bodily movements are not human actions: pure physiological reactions are not constitutive of a human action. Everybody seems to agree on that. The disagreement concerns the point whether it is constitutive for a human action to have meaning or not. It has been a common strategy among Naturalists to negate this and to argue instead that human actions just are events of the same kind as all natural phenomena are and accordingly, that they must be treated as such. Interpretivists on the other hand have argued that it is constitutive for human action that it has meaning – this is what differentiates it from being a bundle of physiological reactions or bodily movements. Interpretivists have rightly insisted on this point – if one admits that human actions need not be meaningful, then the door is automatically opened for the battery of naturalistic arguments that are difficult, if not impossible, to countervail.

The first step of my argument is to grant this point to the Interpretivists and to assume that human actions have meaning, i.e. that human actions are meaningful events. What is it for an action to have meaning? Human action is bestowed with meaning when the actor who is engaging in it interprets it against the background of his goals, his beliefs, and his other mental states while interacting with his natural and social environment; this is a complex process and can involve the conscious or unconscious use of symbols – though it need not. This *nexus of meaning* that arises in connection with a human action can be accessed either from a first-person perspective or from a third-person, i.e. an observer’s, perspective. From a methodological point of view it is important to inquire how the access from the observer’s perspective looks like and how a description, reconstruction and possibly explanation of a nexus of meaning can take place. However, it should be obvious that the information that the actor himself conveys (with the help of which the first-person perspective is described and reconstructed) can be, of course, used for the apprehension of the nexus of meaning from an observer’s perspective. So, a nexus of meaning arises in connection with every human action, this is the starting point.

Step two: Different ways of apprehension of the nexus of meaning

According to one influential view traced back to Max Weber one way of apprehending the nexus of meaning of an action is to identify the *motive* of the action. One has grasped the meaning of an action, if one has been able to state its motive. In the famous formulation of Weber (1922/1985, 550): “A ‘motive’ is a nexus of meaning which seems to the actor himself or to the observer as an adequate ‘reason’ for a conduct in question.”¹ This view is obviously one-sided in presupposing that the bestowal of a given action with meaning is due only to the motivational system of the agent.

Another, even more influential approach suggests that the nexus of meaning of an action can be apprehended, if the *intention* of the action is identified. One has grasped the meaning of an action, if one has been able to state the intention of the actor – stating that an action is meaningful simply reflects the intentional character of the action. John Searle and Daniel Dennett, among others, seem to suggest this approach. In Searle’s account the concept of ‘intention’ is conceived very broadly as ‘directedness’, i.e. as the aspect of mental states by which they are directed at states of affairs in the world beyond themselves (2001, p.34ff.) And in Dennett’s “Theory of Intentional Systems” (1987) the intentional stance is developed as a strategy describing a system in terms of beliefs, desires and other intentional states and in the case of human behaviour the theory suggests that action should be presented with the help of an intentional vocabulary. According to the protagonists of this approach, thus, the meaning of an action can adequately be apprehended, if the respective intention or intentions are specified.

A third approach suggests that the nexus of meaning of an action is apprehended, if one states the *reasons* of the action. As reasons of an action function generally the beliefs and desires whose close specification can reveal the relevant nexus of meaning. This position is usually defended by reference to Donald Davidson’s classic “Actions, Reasons and Causes” (1963/2001) and is often meshed with the intentionalist approach.

These three approaches have in common that they all offer a description of a human action by appealing to a few elements that stand in a one-to-one relationship of the action: *motives*, *intentions* or *reasons*. They are therefore to be classified as ‘one-to-one theories of human

¹ The original German text is: „>>Motiv<< heißt ein Sinnzusammenhang, welcher dem Handelnden selbst oder dem Beobachtenden als sinnhafter >>Grund<< eines Verhaltes erscheint.”

action', since they lack the specification of a mechanism that could more accurately depict the process of bestowing meaning to an action. "The meaning of Anna's action – to cook a meal at seven o' clock in the evening – is that Anna *wants* to be a good mother."; "The meaning of Anna's action – to cook a meal at seven o' clock in the evening – is that Anna has the *intention* to be a good mother."; "The meaning of Anna's action – to cook a meal at seven o' clock in the evening - is that Anna has the *belief* that her behaviour makes her a good mother and that she has the *desire* to be a good mother." Each of these statements captures the meaning of the fact that Anna cooks a meal at seven o'clock in the evening by appealing to Anna's mental states without specifying a mechanism by which these mental states lead to a bestowal of a meaning on her action.

A fourth approach that does specify such a mechanism is the one that focuses on the *rationality* of the actor. The nexus of meaning of an action to be grasped is according to this approach more complex. The actor avails of many goals that he orders according to his preferences and he chooses the course of action of which he expects that will improve his position. It has become a quite standard practice to use the vocabulary and the formal machinery of mainstream economic theory when theorizing on rationality (e.g. Becker, 1976) and to argue that action is the result of a conscious choice of a (more or less) well-informed individual that maximizes his utility given his preferences and the constraints of the environment that he is facing. However, we do not need to bother here about the different versions of the rationality postulate, since we are only concerned with the principle: rationality helps transform the beliefs and desires into a concrete decision which then leads to an action. Thus a more complex mechanism is depicted that is supposed to grasp the meaning of an action in a more satisfactory way: "The meaning of Anna's action – to cook a meal at seven o' clock in the evening – is that, while Anna would rather go to the cinema or for a walk, these options appear less important to her in the face of her goal of being a good mother, and thus she has decided to cook a meal – something that is a *rational decision* given her options, her preferences and her knowledge of circumstances."

Step three: Invariance in the fundamental elements in various nexuses of meaning

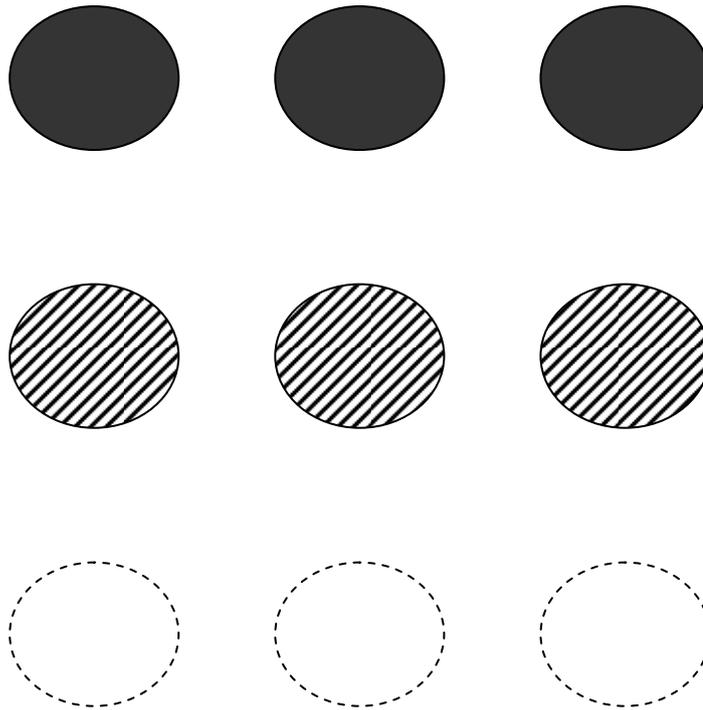
The second step of the argument has showed that there are different approaches and thus a number of possibilities for conveying the nexus of meaning from an observer's perspective. Regardless of the approach, however, and the conceptual apparatus used to apprehend the

nexus of meaning of an action, it is always in principle possible that the *fundamental elements* of this nexus of meaning will also occur in connection with other actions of the same person or of other persons. With ‘fundamental elements’ I mean all relevant mental states of the actor as well as all relevant mechanisms that are at work when an action is performed. Every time that one succeeds in identifying the same fundamental elements either in connection with the nexuses of meaning of other actions of the same person or in connection with the nexuses of meaning of the actions of other persons, it is possible to view nexuses of meaning as causal nexuses. The key of a successful transformation of nexuses of meaning into causal nexuses is in demonstrating an *invariance* in the appearance of the fundamental elements in various nexuses of meaning. In those cases that such a transformation is possible the nexuses of meaning constitute generalizations and thus their repeated appearance can in principle be explained.

Let us take an example of an employee, X, who in a situation S_1 , undertakes the action of going on strike. One can apprehend the nexus of meaning of this action by stating the motive of the action, in this case, namely, that he wants to raise his salary. The fundamental element in this nexus of meaning is the motive of salary raise. If one succeeds in showing, that this element also appears in connection with the actions of other employees X_2, X_3, \dots in a situation S_1 then one has discovered an invariance and therewith transformed the nexuses of meaning into a causal nexus.

Now, in order for my view to be tenable one need in principle only show that there is at least one standpoint from which a series of nexuses of meaning can be shown to be similar. This is a very reasonable requirement which is in fact easily met. There is neither in nature nor in the social world (being a part of it) a single repetition, B , of a process, A , which is absolutely identical to A . All repetitions are merely approximate repetitions, such that B , can be more or less similar to A , depending on the standpoint from which A and B are viewed. Compare the circles in the following figure. In this figure the similarity of certain circles is based on the color, the similarity of certain other circles on the shading, the similarity of others on the interrupted lines that constitute the figures etc. This figure illustrates the simple point that things can only be similar in *certain respects*².

² See the remark of Popper (1959/2003, p.442). “Generally, similarity, and with it repetition, always presuppose the adoption of a *point of view*”.



Emphasizing the similarity of two or more things presupposes that one assumes a certain point of view. In our case, the similarity of a series of nexuses of meaning presupposes that one has assumed a certain point of view from which a transformation of nexuses of meaning into a causal nexus is possible. From many other points of view the nexuses of meaning could be more or less dissimilar, but for my argument to hold, it suffices, if *just one standpoint exists*, from which such a similarity among nexuses of meaning can be shown. This argument can be best illustrated, I think, with the engaging example of Grünbaum in the following quotation (1953, p.769):

“[I]t must be pointed out that *all* particulars in the world are unique, whether they are physical objects like trees, physical events like light flashes, or human beings. The mere assertion that a thing is a particular, means that it is in one way or another unique, different from all other objects of its own kind or of other kinds. Every insignificant tick of my watch is a unique event, for no two ticks can be simultaneous with a given third event. With respect to uniqueness, each tick is on a par with Lincoln’s delivery of the Gettysburg address! It is clear, however, that the uniqueness of physical events does not prevent them from being connected by causal laws, for present causal laws relate only *some* of the features of a given set of events with *some* of the features of another set of events. For example, frictional processes are accompanied by the development of heat in so far as they are frictional, whatever else they may be. A projectile fired under suitable conditions will describe a parabolic orbit regardless of the color of the projectile, its place of manufacture, and so on. Since the cause-effect relation is a

relation between *kinds* of events, it is never necessary that all the features of a given cause be duplicated in order to produce the same kind of effect“.

An immediate criticism to this view is that the argument is in principle based on a series of nexuses of meaning being identified as similar. However, for this to happen, one must show that there must be at least one standpoint from which a series of nexuses of meaning are similar. Even if this is granted, the critic can go on, it is in fact impossible to maintain such a standpoint unaltered over time, the reason being that every standpoint still remains a human standpoint and because of the radical historicity of the human condition, it is impossible to maintain any standpoint permanently. This thesis of the radical historicity of human condition is untenable, however, because it runs into the following difficulty: What can such a thesis mean other than that man and his actions possess a *constant* property, namely precisely this historicity?

It is sufficient, thus, for this step of my argument to be valid, that only one standpoint exists from which nexuses of meaning that arise in connection with a series of actions are shown to be similar in some respect. If this holds, then it is possible to maintain that the nexuses of meaning are repeated over time. I call the repeated occurrence of those fundamental elements – either in nexuses of meaning connected to numerous actions of a particular person or connected to the actions of different persons – the *invariance* of human behaviour.

Step four: Different types of invariance of human behaviour

There are different types of invariance of human behaviour depending on the level (of generality) of the similarity among the fundamental elements in the nexuses of meaning of actions. If the fundamental elements of the nexuses of meaning that arise in connection with the action of all members of the human species are similar in a certain respect, then we can speak of a *genetic invariance*. If the fundamental elements of the nexuses of meaning that arise in connection with the action of all members of a social group are similar in a certain respect, then we can speak of a *cultural invariance*. If the fundamental elements of the nexuses of meaning that arise in connection with the action of a particular person are similar in a certain respect, then we can speak of a *personal invariance*.

To give an example: Person X jumps from the 6th floor of an apartment block and dies. The fundamental elements of the nexus of meaning of this action can be described with the help of

the third approach as follows: Person X has the belief that this action will lead to her death, and she has the desire to die. If it can be shown that these fundamental elements appear in the nexuses of meaning for similar actions of all human beings, then we can speak of a genetic invariance.

Every time it can be shown that an invariance exists, *nexuses of meaning are transformed de facto into causal nexuses*. The statements whose content consist of a description of such causal nexuses are law-like statements. They describe generalizations and thus involve limitations to what can possibly happen³. The important point, thus, is that human actions as meaningful events can be apprehended nomologically or quasi nomologically as soon as an invariance has been identified. This implies that generalizations are very well possible in the social world and that therefore methodological naturalism is tenable: human actions are subject to generalizations so that causal explanations of human behaviour are perfectly possible, *even if one concedes that human actions are meaningful*.

Now, the precise nature of the law-likeness of statements is a difficult problem of the philosophy of science that is not the subject of this paper. I will therefore only show very briefly that my view is independent on the exact notion of law-likeness that one might have. My argument in other words does not hinge on whether one endows the statements that describe the invariances in the nexuses of meaning with the status of being “laws” or merely “generalizations” and that it is in fact compatible with both views that are commonly held by philosophers of science.

According to the traditional notion it is only genuine laws that allow us to explain, predict and intervene in the world (Hempel, 1965). In the tradition of logical empiricism laws have the following features: logical contingency (have empirical content), universality (cover all space and time), truth (are exceptionless) and natural necessity (are not accidental) (Mitchell, 2003, p. 130). In accord with this view, a procedure is causally explained in that the statement that describes it is logically deduced from the conjunction of laws (or law-like statements) and

³ This is the traditional view of law-like statements found for example also in the following quotation of Mach (1917, 450): “A law always consists of a limitation of the possibilities, whether that be considered a limitation of an action, of the unalterable course of the occurrences of nature or of the guidepost for imagining and thinking, which complement the occurrences, occurring before them and hurrying them along”. (“Ein Gesetz besteht immer in einer Einschränkung der Möglichkeiten ob dasselbe als Beschränkung des Handelns, als unabänderliche Leitbahn des Naturgeschehens oder als Wegweiser für unser dem Geschehen ergänzend vorausseilendes Vorstellen und Denken in Betracht kommt.“)

particular statements (initial conditions). For our purposes here it is important to note, that the so-called “covering-law” model of scientific explanation is compatible with the most diverse sorts of hypotheses, which can be formulated with the help of diverse conceptual apparatuses. Thus, explanations of events, and consequently also of human actions, can take place whenever at least one law-like statement is used which can be formulated in very different ways. I have discussed above four approaches that are often discussed in the literature which describe the nexuses of meaning connected with a human action in very different ways. These four approaches view different elements of a nexus of meaning as fundamental: the motives, the intentions, the reasons, and the rationality of the action. From the standpoint of each approach, a causal nexus can arise – namely, if the respective motives, intentions, reasons, or the human rationality that is manifest in the different nexuses of meaning possess certain invariances. One can view the statements that describe these invariances as laws following the traditional view of laws and use them in order to provide explanations and predictions of human behaviour. Accordingly, covering-law explanations based on motives, intentions, reasons, or rationality are possible, as are covering-law explanations of human action based on, at least in principle, an unlimited number of other theories.

In the last decades, however, there are more and more voices protesting against this traditional view of laws being universal, exceptionless, and necessary and hence applicable everywhere and for all time. The criticism is not only raised with respect to the laws in the natural sciences (e.g. Cartwright, 1983, 1989), but also with respect to the laws in biology (e.g. Mitchell, 2003) and in the special sciences (e.g. Woodward, 2000). According to this criticism the traditional criteria for nomological status are either not helpful for understanding what is distinctive about laws or are ideal images that are hardly found when one looks at the actual products of scientific practice. As Mitchell succinctly puts it (2003, p.138):

“At one end of the continuum are those regularities the conditions of which are stable over all time and space. At the other end are the so-called accidental generalizations. And in the vast middle is where most scientific generalizations are found. It is my view that to reserve the title of “law” for just one extreme end is to do disservice to science by collapsing all the interesting variations within science into one category; nonlaws.”

If one wishes to adopt this view then the statements that describe the invariances in the fundamental elements of the nexuses of meaning constitute “generalizations” rather than genuine “laws”. Woodward (2003) argues, for example, that it is possible for generalizations to be invariant only for changes and interventions that occur within a limited spatial or

temporal interval. “[M]any explanatory generalizations in the special sciences seem to have exactly these features and this is one reason why the notion of invariance is particularly well suited to understanding their character” (Woodward, 2000, p.225). Invariant generalizations can in any case function in exactly the same way as traditional laws helping us to explain, predict and intervene in the world. They help, in other words, accomplish the same aims in science as the laws have done for a long time. Hence, even if one does not want to grant the status of “laws” to the generalizations that describe the different types of invariances of the nexuses of meaning, one can still explain and predict human behaviour - with different degrees of success, of course⁴.

3. Conclusion

Even if one grants the main point of the Interpretivists in the philosophy of the social sciences, i.e. that human actions have meaning, it is possible to show that nexuses of meaning *can* be successfully transformed into causal nexuses. Independently on the conceptual apparatus that one wishes to use in order to describe a nexus of meaning of an action, be it the motives, the intentions, the reasons, the rationality of the action or any other means of description, it is always in principle possible that the *fundamental elements* of a nexus of meaning will also occur in connection with other actions of the same person or of other persons. In those cases that an invariance in the appearance of the fundamental elements in the different nexuses of meaning can be demonstrated, the nexuses of meaning have been de facto transformed into a causal nexus. The statements whose content consist in the description of this causal nexus, independently on whether one wishes to call them “laws” or invariant “generalizations”, can be used for causal explanations. Hence, causal explanations of human behaviour are perfectly possible, *even if one concedes that human actions are meaningful*.

Closing, a final remark must be made in order to avoid misunderstandings. My argument only aims to show that nexuses of meaning *can* be successfully transformed into causal nexuses and thus nomologically or quasi-nomologically apprehended. However, they *must* not. There are moreover many cases that such a transformation will not prove to be possible, because of the creative character of human nature and of other reasons. In those cases the formulations of

⁴ An issue that is impossible to tackle here is the issue of causation. There are, of course, quite different views of causality. For a recent critical review see Cartwright (2006).

generalizations are not possible and all what one can aim at, is an accurate reconstruction of a nexus of meaning of the unique action that is true to the facts, a case that is prevalent in history and other scientific disciplines.

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