
1.

This important essay, a worthy link in the long chain of scholarly, probing, insightful, and stimulating books which von Wright has published over the last two decades, is a translation of his Explanation and Understanding.¹ (The translation is, incidentally, an excellent one. I have noted only two misprints serious enough to confuse readers: one on p. 69 where a ‘not’ italicized in the original has been left out in the translation, and one in the important footnote 18 in Chapter Three, where ‘impossible’ in the original, which should read ‘not impossible’, has been faithfully retained in the translation. On the other hand, the translator gets good marks for dropping, in the translation a ‘not’ which should not be there in the original (p. 113).) Since the English version was extensively reviewed at the time, I shall feel free not to provide yet another detailed summary, but to indicate only briefly what the book is about and then examine in some detail Chapter Three which I believe to be the most original, the most controversial, and the most characteristically von Wrightian contribution, as well as being of the greatest interest to me.

The central question raised by von Wright is whether theory-building in the humanistic and social disciplines is “intrinsically the same endeavor” as in the natural sciences.² Von Wright’s main contention is that whereas the Hempelian subsumption-theoretic covering law model is adequate for causal explanation and for ex-

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² See p. 2. (p. 16)
planation in the natural sciences generally, it fails for teleological explanation and for explanation in history and the social sciences. Von Wright suggests that a different model is needed and that "the practical syllogism provides the sciences of man with something long missing from their methodology: an explanation model in its own right which is a definite alternative to the subsumption-theoretic covering law model."\(^3\) These main ideas are organized in four independent chapters, though there is a great deal of overlap between Three and Four.

The first gives a short but illuminating history of the perennial opposition between two explanatory traditions, the Aristotelian which wants to understand things teleologically, and the Galilean which wants to understand them causally.

The second makes five main points: (i) among the various types of causal conceptions still to be found in the natural sciences there is one, the "experimentalist" conception which, though not perhaps essential to the most advanced work of natural scientists,\(^4\) yet "holds an important place in the experimental sciences" besides figuring "as a prototype in the discussion of philosophers"\(^5\). (ii) This conception, of which von Wright gives an account similar to that of Collingwood and Gasking, involves the identification of closed systems and the causal analysis of the relations between the events in such systems, and an account of the asymmetry between cause and effect. (iii) The question of whether or not a system is closed can be determined only by seeing whether it can be put in motion "through an act of interference with nature". (Think of pressing the button of a cigarette machine and preventing it being pressed). (iv) The asymmetry between cause and effect cannot be explained in terms of temporal relationship alone, since the effect may succeed, precede, or be simultaneous with the cause. The distinction between cause-and-effect-factors rests on the distinction between what an agent can "directly" do and what he \textit{thereby} brings about. (v) There is a suggestion that because causal explanations \textit{presuppose} the concept of action it would, for this reason alone, be illegitimate — because it would do away with the concept of action — to try to supplant teleological explanations of actions by causal ones.

3. See p. 27. (p. 37)
4. See p. 36 f. (p. 43 f.)
5. See p. 37. (p. 44)