The Scope of Psychological Explanation

Jeff Coulter

'Explanation' encompasses a complexity of diverse tasks; 'theoretical explanation' has conventionally been restricted to a select few, relatively well-defined scientific undertakings. From among these, Harré comments extensively upon what he refers to as the 'Herzian' mode, according to which a theoretical-explanatory account of a phenomenon involves the postulation of unobservable entities or mechanisms which could be claimed to 'generate' the phenomenon (or its significant properties) under investigation. The brunt of Harré's argument is to show that such a goal for psychological explanation is misplaced; indeed, that it is itself a major source of conceptual and methodological confusions. Such confusions are not confined to Harré's intellectual opponents or 'paradigmatic' competitors in the human sciences, for he confesses to having been once misled by an adherence to an essentially Herzian style of inquiry himself.

Wittgenstein once remarked that to secure a genuine liberation from an entrenched but obfuscating 'metaphysics' or from a profoundly-held misconception of an intellectual kind, one must, so to speak, have felt its power, one must oneself have been beguiled by its deceptive attractiveness or have fallen under its sway. Logical 'therapy' comes into its own when confronting our most cherished delusions, when it can show the fly the way out of the bottle and dissolve the impulse to think in a particular way. There are very few direct 'refutations' to be had of metaphysical positions; usually, the way out involves, not determining 'solutions' but, rather, the acquisition of a new sensibility, of a new way of looking at things in which the former frame of reference no longer has relevance or point, or in which one's former deployment of the operable concepts is radically altered. In the domain of psycholog-

Jeff Coulter • Department of Sociology, Boston University, Boston, Massachusetts 02215.

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cal conceptualization and inquiry, Wittgenstein, in his later writings, diagnosed an intellectual malaise and achieved a kind of liberation which, for him (as well as for those of us who have been inspired by his thought), announced the formation of nothing less than a new sensibility about matters ‘psychological’. Harré seeks to communicate several pertinent facets of this sensibility in his paper, and I propose in this brief comment to attempt to elaborate upon this theme.

The first obstacle to a genuine engagement with Wittgenstein’s (logical, conceptual) criticisms, both explicit and implicit, of various forms of psychological theorizing is the professional demand for generalized explanation(s) of human conduct itself as a goal of intellectual inquiry in this domain. Anyone who asserts the impropriety of such a goal subjects himself immediately to charges of disciplinary treason, intellectual betrayal, anti-scientificity or worse. We have heard of the poet Auden who pronounces against the sin of ‘committing a social science’: Are we now to entertain our own breed of in-house poets who warn us solemnly against what we take to be the very purpose of our intellectual lives? Note, however, that it is not poetry, nor some Rorty-style ‘conversation’, to which Harré is inviting us. We are being urged to abandon a particular mode of explanatory enterprise which can be traced (as Harré succinctly notes) to the Aristotelian search for akrasia. In essence, the search for a successful account of the ‘dynamics of action’, as Harré puts it, has been transformed under the successive regimes of scientific psychology into the search for the causal mechanisms of human conduct as such. For Wittgenstein, as for Harré and many others, such a search is illusory rather than technically or methodologically infeasible. It is illusory because it rests upon fundamental misconceptions of the nature of the phenomena to be thus explained. Most human actions, unlike the organic mobilizations which contextually enter into their realization, are not amenable to causal explanations by strict analogy to the ways in which other physical phenomena may be. This is because different actions may be realized by identical physical mobilizations, and many different physical mobilizations may, contextually, constitute the ‘same’ activity. This is especially clear in the case of speech-acts, as Harré nicely illustrates. What is being proposed is not solely an anti-reductionist argument, although of course Wittgenstein was opposed to reductionisms which were predicated upon conceptual confusions. The successful reductionism of the chemical to the physical involved in, for example, the